THE NECESSITY OF STRENGTHENING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Anchored on institutional theory and utilizing a qualitative analysis of documentary sources, this study investigates the role of resilient public institutions in advancing sustainable development in Nigeria. Addressing a critical gap in the literature that often prioritizes economic indicators over institutional capacity, the study demonstrates that Nigeria's persistent development challenges are largely rooted in weak, fragile, and inefficient governance structures. The findings reveal that institutional deficiencies undermine accountability, transparency, and effective policy implementation, thereby reinforcing corruption, poverty, and socio-economic stagnation. Conversely, the study shows that resilient institutions constitute a foundational driver of political stability, effective governance, and inclusive development. By systematically linking institutional resilience to sustainable development outcomes, this study contributes a nuanced institutional perspective to Nigeria's development discourse. It concludes that sustainable development in Nigeria is unattainable without deliberate and sustained institutional strengthening, positioning institutional reform as a central pathway for unlocking the country's long-term developmental potential.

Keywords: Institutions, Sustainable Development, Weak Institutions, Strong Institutions

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INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, the pursuit of sustainable development is constrained not only by economic limitations but also, more critically, by fragile institutional structures. Despite abundant natural resources and a large human capital base, public institutions in the country frequently struggle to uphold accountability, transparency, and effective governance, key pillars for achieving long-term socio-economic advancement. As noted by Etim et al. (2023), the link between democratic governance and sustainable development in Nigeria is significantly weakened when institutions lack robustness and legitimacy.

North (1990) conceptualizes institutions as the "rules of the game" that shape human interaction and influence political and economic outcomes. Where these rules are weakly enforced or structurally deficient, development efforts tend to falter, and the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) becomes elusive. Nigeria's governance environment reflects this dilemma, characterized by inefficiency, fragmented institutional coordination, and limited responsiveness to citizen needs (Gado, 2024).

Strengthening public institutions in Nigeria, therefore, is not an optional reform agenda but a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable development. Globally, effective, inclusive, and accountable institutions are widely recognized as essential foundations for democratic consolidation and national progress. Development, in its broadest sense, encompasses political, socio-cultural, and economic transformations that enhance quality of life, expand opportunities, and promote stability (Momoh et al., 2025). Public institutions serve as the primary vehicles through which these transformations are initiated, implemented, and sustained. In their absence, policy initiatives remain poorly executed, reforms stagnate, and developmental aspirations are continually deferred (Okolie & Ikenga, 2023).

Although a substantial body of research has explored governance challenges, corruption, and institutional weaknesses in Nigeria, much of this scholarship considers these issues in isolation or adopts a narrow focus on particular sectors or policy outcomes. Consequently, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding the systematic linkage between the strengthening of public institutions and sustainable development within a coherent institutionalist framework. Furthermore, insufficient attention has been given to how institutional fragility directly erodes accountability, weakens policy implementation, diminishes public trust, and constrains Nigeria's ability to attain the Sustainable Development Goals. This study addresses this gap by providing a holistic, theory-driven analysis of the role of public institutions as both the foundation and catalyst for sustainable development in Nigeria. The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the nature and extent of institutional fragility in Nigeria's public sector.
2. Analyze the relationship between institutional strength and sustainable development outcomes in Nigeria.
3. Assess how weak public institutions undermine accountability, governance effectiveness, and the achievement of the SDGs.
4. Propose practical and context-specific strategies for strengthening public institutions to promote sustainable development in Nigeria.

In light of the above, this study underscores the critical importance of strengthening Nigeria's public institutions as a strategic pathway toward sustainable development. It concludes by recommending actionable reforms focused on institutional capacity enhancement,

accountability mechanisms, and participatory governance, without which Nigeria's development ambitions and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals are likely to remain largely unfulfilled.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutional theory offers a crucial framework for understanding how institutions shape social, political, and economic behavior. Early scholars such as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim laid the foundational principles for institutional analysis. Weber highlighted the importance of bureaucracy as a rational-legal authority essential for efficient governance, emphasizing that modern societies depend on hierarchical, rule-based, and impersonal bureaucratic structures to maintain order and stability (Weber, 1978). Similarly, Durkheim stressed the role of institutions in preserving social cohesion, noting that they embody collective norms and values vital for maintaining social order (Durkheim, 1982). These classical perspectives provide the basis for contemporary institutional theory, which examines how formal and informal rules, norms, and organizational structures influence societal behavior and outcomes.

Modern institutional theory, particularly through the work of March and Olsen (1984), introduces the concept of "new institutionalism." They argue that institutions are not merely neutral tools for achieving objectives but are autonomous entities that shape actors' preferences, identities, and strategies. Institutions define what is considered appropriate or legitimate in a given context, highlighting how norms, rules, and routines institutionalize and constrain decision-making beyond simple rational-choice models. North (1990) further elaborates by describing institutions as the "rules of the game" that reduce uncertainty and transaction costs, creating a stable environment for economic and political activity.

Applying institutional theory to Nigeria underscores the critical need to strengthen public institutions to achieve sustainable development. Many of Nigeria's development challenges, including corruption, weak governance, inconsistent policies, and bureaucratic inefficiency, stem from institutional weaknesses. Weak institutions fail to enforce rules, ensure accountability, or deliver public goods effectively, perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment characterized by poverty, inequality, and insecurity. As North (1990) emphasizes, without strong institutions, economic and political reforms are unlikely to produce lasting results. Likewise, Weber's (1978) model of bureaucracy highlights the need for a merit-based, efficient, and rule-bound public service to drive development and modernization.

Strengthening public institutions in Nigeria requires building transparent, accountable, and effective bureaucracies, institutionalizing the rule of law, and embedding democratic norms that promote inclusion and citizen participation. Institutional theory suggests that reforms must go beyond technical adjustments to address the deeper institutional logics that sustain corruption and inefficiency. Drawing on Durkheim (1982), it is equally vital to cultivate social norms that reinforce trust, solidarity, and collective responsibility within public institutions. Ultimately, Nigeria's progress toward sustainable development depends on reforming its institutional framework to ensure governance that is stable, predictable, and legitimate.

Grounded in the institutionalist theoretical perspective, this study underscores the pivotal role of institutions as the formal and informal rules, norms, and organisational arrangements that shape governance and development outcomes. Institutional theory elucidates how entrenched structures influence political conduct, administrative efficiency, and economic performance. Through qualitative analysis of documentary sources, the study contends that Nigeria's enduring underdevelopment is fundamentally linked to the fragility, inefficiency, and limited enforcement capacity of its institutional frameworks. These deficiencies undermine

public confidence, entrench corruption, weaken administrative capacity, and perpetuate systemic failures in governance.

By contrast, robust, resilient, and adaptive institutions foster political stability, uphold the rule of law, enhance transparency, and facilitate effective policy implementation. They also constitute the structural basis for inclusive growth, equitable distribution of resources, and social cohesion, the essential pillars of sustainable development. Nigeria's paradox, in which abundant natural and human resources coexist with pervasive poverty, insecurity, and socio-economic stagnation, exemplifies the resource curse, a condition largely attributable to institutional weaknesses (Okolie & Ikenga, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, seeking an in-depth examination of the relationship between institutional robustness and sustainable development in Nigeria. The principal method utilised is documentary analysis, entailing a systematic review of a broad spectrum of sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, government reports, and institutional records. The selection of documents was guided by clear criteria: relevance to governance and institutional performance, credibility of the source, and publication within the period 2000–2025, thereby capturing both historical and contemporary perspectives on Nigerian public institutions.

Data from the selected documents were subjected to thematic analysis, enabling the identification, examination, and interpretation of recurring patterns, themes, and insights concerning institutional effectiveness, accountability mechanisms, and policy implementation. This analytical approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of how institutional structures and practices shape socio-economic outcomes and sustainable development pathways.

In addition to documentary analysis, the study incorporates the authors' personal observations and experiential insights, based on direct engagement with institutional processes and governance practices. This inclusion is methodologically justified, as it provides contextualised perspectives that enrich the documentary findings and aid in interpreting complex institutional dynamics not fully reflected in published sources. To minimise potential bias, personal observations were systematically documented, critically reflected upon, and triangulated with documentary evidence.

By combining documentary analysis with reflective personal observation, the study attains a comprehensive understanding of both the structural and functional dimensions of public institutions. This approach not only fosters critical engagement with existing scholarship but also highlights gaps in institutional performance, thereby informing practical recommendations for enhancing governance, accountability, and sustainable development in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Institutions

Broadly defined, institutions encompass the formal and informal systems that shape how societies are organized and governed. They include formal structures such as constitutional provisions, statutory laws, and administrative regulations, as well as informal norms like traditions, ethical codes, and shared social conventions that influence behavior and decision-making (Amenta & Ramsey, 2010). Institutions are often described as the "rules of the game" that guide human interaction, while organizations and individuals serve as the "players" operating

within those rules (North, 1990). The interplay between these formal and informal mechanisms determines the direction, pace, and sustainability of a nation's development.

In contemporary discourse, institutions are not merely static frameworks but dynamic systems that evolve in response to social, political, and economic changes (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Their effectiveness largely depends on their capacity to adapt, enforce accountability, and maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the public. According to Rodrik (2019), the quality of institutions, particularly those governing property rights, the rule of law, and public administration, plays a decisive role in shaping national prosperity and social stability.

In the context of this study, public institutions are defined as statutory bodies established by law to perform governmental functions at the federal, state, and local levels. These include the legislature, which enacts laws; the executive, which implements policies; the bureaucracy, which manages administrative functions; the judiciary, which interprets laws; and various regulatory and oversight agencies that ensure compliance and service delivery. The strength, transparency, and adaptability of these public institutions are critical determinants of Nigeria's developmental outcomes and its capacity to achieve sustainable development goals (Okolie & Ikenga, 2023).

Public institutions are deemed weak when the systems regulating political, economic, and social behavior are fragile, ineffective, and unable to prevent the misuse of power or enforce compliance with established norms (Walker,2023). Such institutional fragility diminishes the state's ability to uphold the rule of law, maintain public order, and protect its sovereignty (Nzereogu, 2024). As noted by Ogayi and Onyebuchi (2024), weak institutions often fail to fulfill their core governance functions, leaving them susceptible to elite domination, corruption, and administrative inefficiency. When governmental bodies lack adequate capacity or internal accountability mechanisms, they become easily exploited by individuals or groups pursuing personal or sectional agendas. Consequently, weak institutions foster corruption, diminish public trust, reduce productivity, and hinder sustainable development.

In contrast, strong institutions possess the capacity to govern effectively, promote justice, and advance socio-economic progress. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021), countries with robust institutions demonstrate responsiveness through efficient, citizen-centered service delivery and an innovative civil service. They exhibit reliability by anticipating societal needs, addressing emerging challenges, and formulating forward-looking policies in collaboration with stakeholders. Strong institutions also emphasize openness, ensuring transparency, access to information, and active stakeholder participation in decision-making processes. Integrity is another defining feature, reflected in ethical decision-making, protection of the public interest, anti-corruption efforts, and the maintenance of a professional, impartial bureaucracy. Finally, fairness is evident in their commitment to equity, improved living standards, and the consistent treatment of citizens and businesses regardless of background. Altogether, strong institutions are defined by resilience, transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, qualities that form the essential foundation for achieving sustainable development.

Sustainable Development

Development is understood as a multidimensional process encompassing significant transformations in social structures, cultural attitudes, and institutional frameworks, alongside economic growth, reduction of inequality, and the eradication of extreme poverty (Todaro & Smith, 2006; Okolie & Ikenga, 2023). Sustainability, on the other hand, refers to the equitable and efficient use of resources both within the present generation and across future generations, ensuring that socio-economic activities operate within the limits of a finite ecosystem (Stoddart

et al., 2011). Consequently, sustainable development can be defined as development that satisfies the needs of the present without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Schaefer & Crane, 2005).

The concept of sustainable development rose to global attention with the release of the Brundtland Commission Report, *Our Common Future*, which defined it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". While this definition is widely recognized internationally, it requires contextual adaptation for Nigeria. In the Nigerian context, sustainable development extends beyond environmental considerations, representing a comprehensive framework for progress that simultaneously advances economic growth, social equity, and environmental stewardship (Okolie & Ikenga, 2023).

Sustainable development encompasses three interrelated dimensions which are economic growth, social equality and equity and social sustainability. Economic growth emphasizes the establishment of productive systems that meet current consumption demands while preserving resources for the future, often supported by technological innovations to replenish resources depleted during production. Social equality and equity highlight the importance of empowerment, inclusivity, cultural identity, and institutional stability, with development viewed as fundamentally about people. Social sustainability entails a framework that reduces poverty and promotes participation and accessibility. Environmental protection focuses on maintaining the resilience and productivity of natural ecosystems, ensuring they continue to support human survival while preserving ecological integrity and the carrying capacity of the environment (Taylor, 2016).

Schaefer and Crane (2005) emphasize that sustainable development encompasses a complex interaction between economic, social, and environmental factors. In Nigeria, this concept entails diversifying the economy beyond oil dependence, investing in human capital through quality education and healthcare, promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities, and safeguarding the country's rich biodiversity and natural resources for future generations. It also involves addressing environmental challenges such as climate change, desertification, and pollution, which disproportionately impact vulnerable populations. Thus, sustainable development in Nigeria aims to foster a society where economic growth is inclusive, social justice is prioritized, and environmental responsibility is a collective commitment.

The Relationship between Public Institutions and Sustainable Development

Studies have shown that effective, inclusive, and accountable public institutions are essential for socio-economic development in any society. While sustainable development encompasses the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of life, ensuring the well-being of both present and future generations, institutional sustainability is central to achieving this goal (Imhanlahimi & Ajiteru, 2023). The stark differences in development levels and institutional performance between developed and underdeveloped countries underscore the critical role of strong institutions in promoting sustainable development. The formulation and execution of a country's development agenda largely depend on how its institutions operate within established norms (Ogayi & Onyebuchi, 2024). In nations where institutions are robust and political leaders adhere to institutional controls, a conducive environment for sustainable development is created. Strong institutions not only enhance socio-economic predictability but also establish and enforce rules, thereby fostering lawful conduct and stability. In contrast, when institutions are weak, corrupt,

or manipulated by political interests, sustainable development is hindered. Dysfunctional institutions often result in poor governance, ineffective policy implementation, misaligned resource allocation, inability to meet socio-economic objectives resulting in poor development outcomes.

For example, in 2000, the United Nations adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of eight global objectives aimed at addressing some of the world's most pressing challenges by 2015. These included eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating major diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability, and fostering global partnerships. Building on this framework, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015, expanding the agenda to 17 global objectives aimed at achieving a more sustainable and equitable future by 2030. The SDGs include ending poverty and hunger, ensuring healthy lives, providing quality education, promoting gender equality, ensuring clean water and sanitation, advancing affordable and clean energy, fostering decent work and economic growth, building resilient infrastructure, making cities inclusive and safe, ensuring sustainable consumption and production, combating climate change, protecting oceans and forests, promoting peace and justice, strengthening institutions, and enhancing global partnerships.

Although all the 193 member states of the UN are committed to the SDGs, progress has been uneven. Countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and Finland are leading in implementation. Nations with strong institutions, including Singapore, Botswana, and South Korea, have successfully leveraged limited resources into engines of development through visionary leadership, strict accountability, and active citizen participation. Conversely, countries with abundant resources but weak institutions, such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and many sub-Saharan African nations, continue to struggle with poverty, burdened by the resource curse, instability, and underdevelopment.

Fragile Institutions in Nigeria: Indicators, Root Causes, and Implications for Sustainable Development

A defining feature of post-independence Nigeria has been the prevalence of weak public institutions, with profound and multifaceted consequences for sustainable development. One of the most significant impacts is pervasive corruption without an effective mechanism to bring perpetrators to book. Over the past two and a half decades, systemic corruption has deeply undermined Nigeria's development ambitions, permeating all levels of society, eroding ethical standards, and becoming institutionalized. As Ackerman (1999) notes, the diversion of resources intended for public development into private hands has contributed to underdeveloped infrastructure, frustrated electrification projects, limited access to potable water, and inadequately trained graduates and professionals. Corruption further weakens governance by promoting mediocrity, politicizing the civil service, compromising merit-based processes, and undermining institutional integrity. The corruption conundrum in Nigeria is further complication by what could be described as the 'all progress congress effect' which has created safe haven for corrupt politicians from opposition political parties who sins are automatically forgiven onces they cross-carpet.

Poor and low-quality leadership also hampers sustainable development. Leadership drives societal change and can either facilitate or inhibit progress. Visionary, inclusive, and adaptive leaders can advance sustainability goals, while self-serving, corrupt, or shortsighted leaders obstruct development. In Nigeria, leadership failures, characterized by corruption,

looting and primitive accumulation of wealth, and manipulation of government for personal gain, have prevented democracy from translating into effective governance anchored in transparency, accountability, and equity (Fage, 2021).

The legislature, a cornerstone of democratic governance, has also shown inefficiency. In constitutional democracies, legislatures are crucial for lawmaking, policy formulation, oversight, budgetary control, and public engagement. However, since the return to democracy in 1999, Nigerian legislatures at all levels have been weakened by executive dominance, poor institutional culture, low staff quality, and general apathy (Momoh et al., 2025). This has led to inconsistent or poorly drafted laws, weak oversight, executive overreach, and prioritization of personal or ethnic interests over national development.

The judiciary, another key institution for sustainable development, has been compromised. In a functioning democracy, the judiciary not only interprets the law but also shapes policies and ensures accountability. In Nigeria, however, the judiciary suffers from a lack of independence, corruption, inadequate funding, political interference in judicial appointments, weak enforcement of court decisions, procedural delays, low remuneration, limited access to justice, and insufficient accountability mechanisms (Nwafor, 2023). These weaknesses erode public trust and undermine the rule of law.

Policing and security are equally critical for development, as emphasized by Section 14(1b) of the 1999 Constitution, which states that the security and welfare of the people are primary governmental responsibilities. Yet, insecurity in Nigeria, manifested in terrorism, banditry, and communal violence, reflects institutional failings, including undertrained and under-resourced security forces, reactive rather than proactive measures, inter-agency rivalry, corruption, inadequate funding, and political interference (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019; Mimiko, 2010).

Citizen disengagement further weakens governance and development. Public policy in Nigeria is often top-down, elitist, and non-participatory, leaving citizens excluded from decision-making. This fosters low trust in institutions, apathy, and reduced civic participation. The effects are far-reaching: weakened democratic institutions, poor governance, heightened insecurity, stunted development in education, health, infrastructure, and economic reform, and erosion of civic identity. Citizens' lack of engagement undermines inclusivity and ownership of national progress (Bello, Adamu & Mackson, 2023).

Lastly, policy inconsistency and fragility undermine sustainable development. Nigerian administrations frequently abandon or alter development plans, prioritizing short-term political gains over long-term growth. Economic policies are often vulnerable to internal power struggles, reflecting a broader pattern of "plan indiscipline" that disrupts continuity and impedes sustainable development (Imhanlahimi & Ajiteru, 2023). The combination of corruption, poor leadership, weak legislative and judicial institutions, inadequate security, citizen disengagement, and policy fragility collectively explains why weak institutions continue to hinder Nigeria's development aspirations.

Fragile Public Institutions and the Erosion of Accountability, Governance Effectiveness, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Fragile public institutions substantially limit accountability, weaken governance effectiveness, and ultimately hinder the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria. Institutions comprise the formal and informal rules, norms, and organisations that shape political, economic, and social interactions. Where such

institutions lack capacity, autonomy, or legitimacy, their ability to deliver public value and uphold the rule of law is seriously undermined.

To begin with, fragile institutions weaken accountability by fostering environments in which public officials are seldom held to account for their actions. Inadequate oversight mechanisms, weak judicial systems, and politicised anti-corruption bodies frequently permit misconduct, corruption, and abuses of power to persist with little or no sanction. Under these conditions, transparency is limited, public resources are easily diverted, and citizens' confidence in the answerability of their leaders is eroded. This decline in accountability runs counter to SDG 16, which prioritises the promotion of peaceful, just, and inclusive institutions (North, 1990; United Nations, 2015).

Furthermore, governance effectiveness is reduced when public institutions lack technical competence, professionalism, and effective coordination. Weak bureaucratic frameworks often give rise to poor policy design, inconsistent implementation, and substandard service delivery. Policies intended to address poverty, health, education, and environmental sustainability frequently falter at the implementation stage owing to institutional inefficiencies, overlapping responsibilities, and limited inter-agency cooperation. Consequently, government action tends to be reactive rather than strategic, thereby constraining progress towards key SDGs such as the eradication of poverty (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), and good health and well-being (SDG 3) (World Bank, 2020).

Finally, fragile public institutions impede the attainment of the SDGs by widening the divide between policy commitments and actual outcomes. Although governments may formally endorse global development agendas, institutional weakness often obstructs the effective domestication, financing, monitoring, and evaluation of SDG-related policies. Development initiatives are frequently compromised by elite capture, patronage politics, and exclusionary decision-making processes that marginalise vulnerable groups. This not only slows progress across multiple SDGs but also exacerbates social inequality and deepens public mistrust in the state (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Etim et al., 2023).

Thus, the persistence of fragile public institutions perpetuates a cycle of weak accountability, ineffective governance, and stalled sustainable development. Strengthening institutional capacity, improving transparency, and fostering inclusive governance are therefore critical prerequisites for transforming the SDGs from aspirational commitments into tangible and enduring development outcomes.

According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), public institutions serve as the backbone of governance, providing the framework, policies, and administrative mechanisms necessary for societal organisation and development. The quality of governance, encompassing transparency, accountability, rule of law, and policy effectiveness, is largely contingent upon the strength and legitimacy of these institutions. Strong, well-functioning institutions enhance governance quality, which, in turn, promotes sustainable development outcomes across social, economic, and environmental dimensions (North, 1990).

When institutions are weak or dysfunctional, governance suffers from inefficiency, corruption, and policy inconsistency, undermining efforts to achieve sustainable development. For instance, ineffective public procurement systems, poor regulatory enforcement, and lack of policy continuity can erode public trust, reduce investment in key sectors, and exacerbate inequality (Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2010). Conversely, robust institutions facilitate resource mobilisation, strategic planning, and effective service delivery, creating an environment conducive to economic growth, social equity, and environmental stewardship (World Bank, 2021).
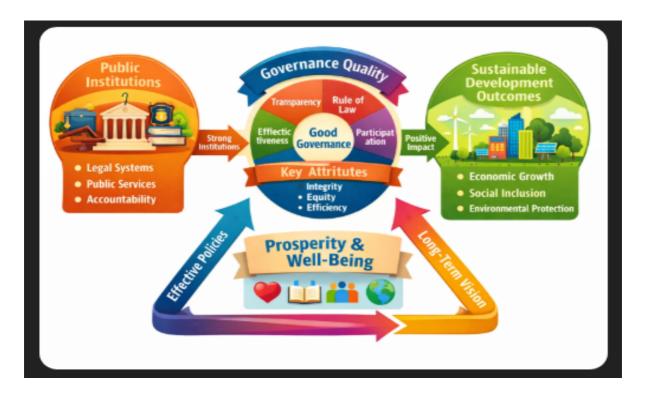
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Relationship between Public Institutions, Governance Quality, and Sustainable Development Outcomes
Source: Authors' Construction, 2025

Empirical studies have demonstrated that countries with strong institutional frameworks and high governance quality generally achieve better development outcomes, including higher human development indices, lower poverty rates, and improved environmental performance (Fukuyama, 2013). This suggests a direct, positive relationship: strengthening public institutions enhances the quality of governance, which consequently drives sustainable development. Therefore, institutional reform and capacity-building remain critical strategies for governments seeking to achieve long-term developmental goals.

Building Resilient Institutions for Sustainable Development in Nigeria
The ultimate objective of aligning public administration with sustainable development is to create resilient institutions. But what exactly are "resilient institutions"? According to the *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, resilience is "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedback". Applied to public administration, resilient institutions are those capable of withstanding shocks, adapting to changing circumstances, and continuing to fulfill their mandates effectively, even in challenging conditions.

For Nigeria, developing resilient institutions is critical given the numerous challenges facing the country, including economic instability, security threats, climate change, and socio-political tensions. Experience in governance, such as in Nigeria, highlights the urgent need for institutions that are not only strong but also flexible and responsive. Several key pillars are fundamental for achieving institutional resilience in Nigeria:
Good Governance and Rule of Law: At the core of resilient institutions is good governance, defined by transparency, accountability, public participation, and adherence to the rule of law. Institutions that operate within clear legal frameworks and ensure open, scrutinized decision-

making processes gain public trust and legitimacy, which strengthens their resilience. Policies promoting transparency in government contracts, anti-corruption measures, and due process are not only ethical imperatives but practical tools for fortifying institutions (Imhanlahimi & Ajiteru, 2023).

Capacity Building and Professionalization: Resilient institutions rely on competent, ethical, and well-trained personnel. Investing in human capital through continuous professional development, training programs, and merit-based recruitment and promotions is essential. A professionalized civil service forms the backbone of effective governance. Strengthening the skills and expertise of public servants equips institutions to innovate, adapt, and respond effectively to complex development challenges (Momoh et al., 2025).

Institutional Autonomy and Independence: While public institutions must remain accountable to citizens and political leadership, they also require operational independence to function effectively and impartially. This is especially important for oversight institutions such as anti-corruption agencies, electoral commissions, and the judiciary. Independence from political interference enhances credibility and enables decisions that prioritize public interest and merit, thereby reinforcing institutional resilience (Nwafor, 2023).

Digital Transformation and Innovation: In today's interconnected world, resilient institutions must embrace digital technologies and innovation. Leveraging technology can improve efficiency, transparency, and service delivery, making governance more accessible and responsive. E-governance initiatives can transform administrative processes. In Nigeria, digital solutions have been implemented in areas such as land administration and revenue collection, emphasizing the role of technology in strengthening institutional capacity. Investments in data management, cybersecurity, and digital literacy are critical to this effort (Nwafor, 2023).

Citizen Engagement and Participation: Resilient institutions are embedded within the communities they serve. Encouraging citizen participation enhances institutional legitimacy and effectiveness. When citizens are actively involved in decision-making, they are more likely to support policies and hold institutions accountable. Initiatives such as public dialogues, feedback platforms, and community-based participatory planning ensure that policies reflect the real needs and priorities of the populace, fostering sustainable and resilient outcomes. Active citizen oversight is crucial for strong public institutions. Civil society organizations must be encouraged to serve as policy advocates, watchdogs, and civic educators. Legal and financial frameworks supporting CSOs should be reinforced to prevent state intimidation and protect the shrinking civic space. Institutionalized collaboration between government and civil society can enhance monitoring of service delivery, budget implementation, and electoral processes (Imhanlahimi & Ajiteru, 2023).

Adaptive Capacity and Learning: Finally, resilient institutions demonstrate adaptive capacity, the ability to learn from experience, incorporate new information, and evolve in response to changing conditions. This requires a culture of continuous improvement, evidence-based policymaking, and performance monitoring. This underscores the importance of organizational learning in public sector reform. In practice, fostering feedback mechanisms, integrating lessons learned into planning, and encouraging innovation enable institutions to not only withstand challenges but thrive in dynamic environments (Momoh et al., 2025).

Leadership Re-orientation: A culture of credible and ethical leadership is fundamental to institutional strength. Leadership failures have historically hindered Nigeria's governance. To foster sustainable development, political leadership recruitment must be reformed to ensure that individuals of integrity, competence, and patriotism occupy positions of authority. This involves revising political party structures, electoral systems, and campaign financing to reduce the

influence of money politics. Leadership training should be institutionalized for both elected officials and career administrators to instill values of service, accountability, and nation-building. Mentorship programs should also be promoted to cultivate ethical leadership across generations (Bello et al., 2023).

Promoting Transparency and Accountability: Transparency and accountability are critical for public trust and effective institutional performance. Government processes should be digitized to minimize human interference and reduce corruption. Public office holders should be required to make verifiable asset declarations, with periodic audits enforced. Whistleblower protections and reward systems should be strengthened to encourage vigilance. Oversight institutions, such as the Auditor-General's Office, Public Accounts Committees, and civil society watchdogs, must be properly funded and independent. Digital platforms can also facilitate real-time service delivery, budgeting, and citizen feedback, creating an effective accountability loop (Imhanlahimi & Ajiteru, 2023).

Administrative Reforms: Efficient administration drives sustainable development. E-governance and digital data management systems should be implemented to reduce bureaucracy, improve decision-making speed, and ensure transparency. Inter-agency collaboration should be strengthened, and capacities for climate action and disaster risk management developed. Partnerships between government, civil society, and the private sector should be institutionalized for effective policy implementation. Continuous professional development programs, merit-based recruitment, and performance-based reward systems are essential to ensure a competent, ethical, and motivated public service (Bello et al., 2023).

Holistic Anti-Corruption Drive: Corruption continues to undermine Nigeria's development and institutional effectiveness. A comprehensive anti-corruption strategy should strengthen agencies like the EFCC, ICPC, and Code of Conduct Bureau while protecting their independence. Transparency measures and early-warning systems for financial and procurement irregularities should be implemented. Nationwide public awareness programs should highlight the costs of corruption and the value of integrity. Equitable wages, fair incentives, and improved working conditions for public servants can reduce incentives for corruption. Collaborations with international anti-corruption organizations can provide knowledge exchange and global oversight, while strict penalties for corruption-related offenses should serve as deterrents (Momoh et al., 2025). A decisive, conscious and deliberate effort toward dissuading the emerging all peoples congress effect as an enabler to corrupt practices in the political circle is urgently needed to sanitize the body polity in Nigeria if we must make progress.

Political and Civic Education: Sustainable democracy depends on an informed citizenry and ethical leadership. Comprehensive political education should be integrated into schools and adult learning programs to enlighten citizens on their rights, responsibilities, and democratic principles. Agencies like the National Orientation Agency (NOA) should conduct sustained value-reorientation campaigns to promote integrity, patriotism, and ethical behavior. Political leadership recruitment should emphasize competence and integrity over wealth, ethnicity, or patronage. Citizens should be encouraged to move from passive spectators to active participants who demand accountability (Nwafor, 2023).

Judicial Reform: The judiciary, as guardian of constitutionalism and the rule of law, must be empowered to function independently. Judicial appointments should be transparent and merit-based, free from executive or legislative interference. Case management systems should be digitized to reduce delays and backlogs. Continuous professional training is needed to strengthen judicial competence in emerging legal areas such as cybercrime, climate law, and international

arbitration. Adequate funding is essential to ensure operational efficiency and reduce dependence on political goodwill (Imhanlahimi & Ajiteru, 2023).

Empowering Local Institutions: Sustainable development requires strong grassroots governance. Decentralization of power and resources is critical to enhance local government autonomy. Local governance structures should be strengthened through training, resource provision, and effective oversight mechanisms. Citizen participation should be encouraged through town hall meetings, participatory budgeting, and inclusive policy dialogues. Civil society organizations should be empowered to act as watchdogs and partners in development, bridging the gap between government and communities (Momoh et al., 2025). By focusing on these pillars, Nigeria can build public institutions capable of sustaining development in the face of complex and evolving challenges. These measures collectively aim to build resilient, accountable, and responsive public institutions capable of driving sustainable development in Nigeria.

Table 1: Summary of Nigeria's Developmental Policies and Plans from 1960 – 2025
Sources: Compiled by the Authors, 2025

Developmental Plans	Period	Objectives/Target of Plans
First National Development Plan	1962 - 1968 -	To encourage the assemblage of agricultural produce for export purposes
Second National Development plan	1970 – 1980	Post-war reconstruction, restoring productive capacity, overcoming critical bottlenecks, and achieving self-reliance (i.e, meant to achieve a united, just, strong, and self-reliant nation)
Third National Development Plan	1975-1974	Emphasize the need to reduce regional disparities to foster national unity through the adoption of integrated rural development.
Fourth National Development Plan	1981 - 1985	A civilian government Development plan which emphasized, among other things, the need for balanced development of the different sectors of the economy and of the various geographic areas of the country
Post- Fourth National Development Plan Period	1983 – 1985	Cut down corruption, inflation, and import of consumables; repayment of foreign debts as quickly as possible, etc
Post-fourth National Development Plan Period	1985-1987	Establishment of the Decorate for Food, Rural infrastructure (DIFFRI) in 1985, for the purpose of providing rural infrastructure in the countryside
Fifth National Development Plan	1988-1992	Structural adjustment programme (SAP): To devalue the naira, remove import licenses, reduce tariffs, open the economy to foreign trade, promote non-oil exports through incentives, and

		achieve national self-sufficiency in food production
First National Rolling Plan	1988-1992	To strengthen the programme being implemented by the National Directorate of Employment
Second National Rolling Plan	1992-1995	To tackle several monetary lapses as well as to reduce inflation and exchange rate instability, maintain infrastructure, achieve agricultural self-sufficiency, and reduce the burden of SAP
Third National Rolling Plan	1998	Employment generation.
Vision 2010	1996 – 2010	To transform the country and place it firmly on the route to becoming a developed nation by the year 2010
Vision 2015	2010 – 2015	Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) created by the UN to help achieve 8 MDG goals by the year 2015: Eradicating Extreme poverty and hunger; Promoting Gender Equality and Empowering Women; Reduce Child Mortality; improve maternal Health; combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases; Ensure Environmental Sustainability and Development. Nigeria embraced the vision and developed.
Vision 20:2020	2009-2018	(blueprint) to make Nigeria among the top 20 economies in terms of GDP size by 2020
7-point Agenda	2007-2010	Wealth creation, development of physical infrastructure (power, energy, and transportation), human capital development (education and health), security, law and order, land tenure changes and ownership, regional development (Niger Delta), and food security
Transportation Agenda	2011-2015	Medium-term strategy to speed up the realization of vision 20:2020 through: creating jobs to resolve unemployment and reduce poverty; laying the foundation for robust and inclusive economic growth; improving the well-being of Nigerians regardless of their circumstance and location
Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP)	2015-2023	Medium-term strategy to restore growth through: diversification of the economy, increase infrastructural spending (high spending on road, rail, and power projects) to drive growth

Renewed Hope Agenda	2023-date	A blueprint aimed at revitalizing Nigeria's economy, governance, and social system. Based on eight areas: Economic Reform, National Security, Energy & Transportation, Education, Health & Social Investment, Industrialization & Innovation, and Governance.

From the above table, it is clear that since the restoration of democracy in 1999, Nigeria's development trajectory has been hampered by institutional weaknesses. The legislature struggles with executive dominance and a lack of independence, the executive is undermined by corruption and inconsistent policies, the judiciary is slow and vulnerable to external pressures, and the bureaucracy, alongside other agencies, often exhibits inefficiency and rent-seeking behavior. These structural deficiencies significantly impact governance, development, and citizens' daily lives, creating a cycle of underdevelopment (Bello et al., 2023). The fragility of Nigeria's institutions can be traced to several key factors:

State Capture: This refers to the manipulation of public laws, policies, and institutions for personal gain at the expense of the public good. Since re-democratization in 1999, institutional performance has often been subordinated to individual personalities rather than principles of governance. As Owogbemi (2012) notes, structurally weak institutions hinder the translation of national economic potential into sustainable development. Azoro, Onah, and Agulefo (2021) further argue that administrative flaws impede institutional effectiveness, while leadership problems, pervasive corruption, ethnic and regional loyalties, and a generally amoral public sphere collectively obstruct efficient governance and development.

In practice, public institutions in Nigeria are frequently undermined by the ruling and bureaucratic elite, whose interference compromises institutional operations. Instances of executive misconduct, disregard for the rule of law, and constitutional violations are well documented (Ukose & Dzeka, 2018; Okoli, K., Nwokoye, Kalu & Metu, 2025). The legislature is weakened and unable to provide checks on executive power (The Cable, October 14, 2023), the judiciary faces credibility challenges due to corruption and lack of independence (Olufemi, 2022), and media manipulation often shapes public perception to suppress dissent.

Lip Service to Institutional Strengthening: Political leaders often pay only verbal homage to the importance of strong institutions, using rhetoric to secure political power or office. Once in power, these leaders exploit institutional weaknesses for personal gain. This superficial commitment contributes to widespread poverty, economic stagnation, political instability, unemployment, insurgency, social unrest, abuse of power, and violations of the rule of law (Bello et al., 2023).

Prebendalism: Joseph (1987) describes a governance culture in Nigeria characterized by the expropriation of public resources for personal or political benefit. This practice undermines good governance, subverts merit-based selection, fosters voter apathy, reduces trust in democratic institutions, and turns elections into contests for access to state resources rather than platforms for policy debate. Prebendal politics perpetuates mediocrity, politicizes the civil service, weakens institutions, and entrenches patronage in contract awards and policy decisions, creating a cycle of underdevelopment.

Undemocratic Political Culture: The lack of genuine commitment to democratic ideals further weakens Nigeria's institutions. Displays of despotic tendencies and disregard for democratic principles have degraded governance quality and perpetuated underdevelopment (Olufemi,

2022). Weak institutions foster profligacy, low accountability, poor transparency, and minimal responsiveness to citizens, resulting in deteriorating infrastructure and collapsing health and education systems.

Erosion of Constitutional Supremacy: Although the 1999 Constitution emphasizes constitutionalism, adherence to this principle has been inconsistent. The separation of powers, checks and balances, and the rule of law are often violated, as evidenced by executive impunity, legislative subservience, and widespread disregard for court rulings.

Building resilient institutions requires more than intentions; it necessitates systems that are transparent, accountable, and adaptable. In this context, reforms in Public Financial Management (PFM) are critical, as they provide fiscal discipline, efficiency, and credibility, enabling development policies to be implemented effectively rather than remaining theoretical.

Improving Public Financial Management as a Pillar for Strengthening Institutional Resilience

A vital aspect of building resilient institutions in Nigeria lies in strengthening Public Financial Management (PFM) systems. Robust PFM ensures the fiscal discipline, efficiency, and accountability required for sustainable development. It forms the backbone of effective governance, guaranteeing that public resources are mobilized fairly, allocated to priority areas, used transparently, and reported credibly. Without sound financial management systems, even well-designed development policies risk failure during implementation.

Equally essential is the advancement of e-governance, which has digitized critical government processes, including land administration, procurement, and service delivery. By harnessing technology, public institutions can reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks, enhance transparency, and make government services more accessible to citizens. This allows for more direct engagement with government platforms, minimizes opportunities for corruption, and improves overall service efficiency.

When revenues are collected transparently, expenditures are monitored in real time, and service delivery is underpinned by technology-driven governance, public trust and credibility in government are strengthened. PFM reforms provide the financial foundation that enables governments to absorb shocks, respond to economic fluctuations, and continue delivering essential services. In this way, public administration and sustainable development transition from abstract goals to tangible outcomes experienced by citizens daily.

International examples underscore these lessons. Rwanda and Ghana have leveraged digital platforms to enhance tax collection and broaden fiscal space for development, while Estonia exemplifies e-governance with nearly all services digitized and high levels of citizen trust. Enugu's initiatives reflect this broader trend, demonstrating that investments in financial transparency, digital transformation, and accountable governance not only foster resilient institutions but also enhance a state's credibility within the global community of reform-oriented governments.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The core argument of this discussion is that Nigeria cannot achieve sustainable development without the presence of strong, resilient public institutions. Institutions form the foundation upon which governance, economic management, and societal order are built. When these institutions are weak, they foster inefficiency, corruption, instability, and a culture of impunity. In contrast, strong institutions act as catalysts for innovation, inclusion, and national progress. Unfortunately,

since independence, Nigeria's institutional framework has been fragile. The legislature often operates under executive dominance and lacks independence; the executive suffers from corruption and inconsistent policies; the judiciary is perceived as slow and vulnerable to external influences, while the bureaucracy and other agencies frequently display inefficiency and rent-seeking tendencies. These structural deficiencies collectively reinforce a cycle of underdevelopment.

Addressing this challenge requires more than superficial reforms or political rhetoric. It calls for a deliberate, sustained, and multifaceted approach encompassing leadership reorientation, institutionalization of transparency and accountability, administrative reforms, and a comprehensive fight against corruption. Judicial independence, civic education, empowerment at the grassroots level, and meaningful engagement with civil society are equally critical. These measures are interconnected, and if implemented sincerely, they can collectively steer Nigeria toward sustainable development.

The urgency of this task cannot be overstated. Sustainable development goals, spanning education, health, poverty reduction, and climate resilience, cannot be realized amidst dysfunctional institutions. Without transparency and accountability, public resources will continue to be diverted by corrupt elites. Without administrative reforms, public servants will remain ill-prepared to implement digital governance and provide efficient services. Without civic education, citizens will remain passive and vulnerable to manipulation, undermining democratic processes. Without an independent judiciary, the rule of law will remain largely symbolic, enabling impunity among the powerful.

Nigeria can draw lessons from both its own experience and global examples. Nations that have cultivated strong institutions, such as Singapore, Botswana, and South Korea, have converted limited resources into engines of development through visionary leadership, accountability, and active citizen engagement. Conversely, countries with abundant resources but weak institutions, like the Democratic Republic of Congo, remain mired in poverty and instability. Nigeria faces a critical choice: continue with the status quo and remain trapped in underdevelopment or commit to comprehensive institutional reforms to fully harness its human and material potential.

In conclusion, strengthening public institutions is not merely a matter of good governance; it is essential for national survival. Sustainable development cannot be imposed or wished into being; it must be constructed on a foundation of transparent, accountable, merit-based, and people-centered institutions. For Nigeria to achieve its developmental ambitions and assume its rightful place among the world's progressing nations, the fortification of its institutions must be treated as an urgent and non-negotiable priority. Failure to do so would be akin to building on unstable ground, inevitably resulting in stagnation, regression, and continued socio-economic challenges. The following recommendations outline practical measures that, if effectively executed, can strengthen Nigeria's public institutions and foster inclusive, transparent, and sustainable development:

i. The Nigerian government should implement digital governance across all ministries, agencies, and local government bodies to enable real-time monitoring of expenditures, service delivery, and resource allocation. This should incorporate mandatory asset declarations for public officials, robust whistleblower protection mechanisms, and empowerment of oversight institutions to function independently and effectively.

ii. Structured leadership development and capacity-building programs should be introduced for both elected officials and civil servants, with a focus on ethical governance, efficient service delivery, and merit-based decision-making. Mentorship initiatives should

also be expanded to cultivate a culture of integrity, accountability, and professional excellence among current and future leaders.

iii.   Comprehensive reforms should be undertaken to ensure the independence and efficiency of the judiciary and regulatory bodies. Measures should include digitized case management systems, merit-based appointments, adequate funding, and mechanisms to enforce compliance with policies, contracts, and anti-corruption laws, thereby strengthening the rule of law and institutional credibility.

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