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RESEARCH ARTICLE

GOVERNANCE AND INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT: A CATALYST FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN SOUTHEAST STATES NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nexus of Governance and Infrastructural Development as a pathway for addressing the alarming rates of Youth Unemployment in South East States Nigeria. The South East States Nigeria faces significant challenges of unemployment with the zone having the rate of unemployment at 9.03 percent as reported by the National Bureau of Statistics. Fundamentally, the inability of the successive Government to create Institutions and Infrastructures that will stimulate and ensure the welfare and good living of the citizens has been a precarious situation in the zone which consist of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi and Imo State is a worrisome development. The study reviewed exant and related Literature with Human capital theory as a theoretical framework of analysis. In context of methods, this study proceed from non-structured, non-experimental, non-surveyed and adopted qualitative documentary secondary sources of historical description and explanatory approach for its secondary data collection. Equally, content analytical technique was used for its analysis. Based on the analysis, findings shows poor policy planning, formulation, implementation and evaluation, weak institutional capacity and accountability, poor stake-holders engagement, unbridled and unpatriotic leadership style among others were the disturbing challenges that has cumulatively brought devastating hardship, poverty, socioeconomic misery, with the high rates of unemployment as a bye-product in the zone. The study therefore, recommends a holistic re-calibration in policy formulation mechanism, strengthening and improving institutional capacity delivery, vocational youth training and integration, observance of due process, accountability and transparency as imperative and desideratum for sustainable Governance and development in the zone.

Keywords: Governance, youth employment, infrastructural development, southeastern states, poor planning.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Governance fundamentally shapes the pace, quality, and distribution of socio-economic development. It involves the institutions, processes, and formal/informal rules through which citizens articulate interests, exercise legal rights, fulfill obligations, and resolve societal conflicts. In particular, the effectiveness of governance determines how public resources are allocated, how infrastructural projects are selected, executed and maintained, and how accountability and transparency are enforced. In South East Nigeria (comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States), the potential offered by entrepreneurial energy, human capital and commercial networks is constrained by structural infrastructure deficits such as unreliable electricity, poor roads, water shortages and inconsistent ICT provision that elevate transaction costs, restrict business expansion, and push many young people into low-productivity informal activities.

Ebiziem (2025) argued that poor infrastructure is the major impediment businesses face in scaling operations and hiring more staff. Effective governance to him is viewed from five cardinal indices like; the initiation and maintenance of rapid socio-economic development, the establishment and development of a free market economy, the establishment of basic organizational framework that acts as an anchor to foster sustainable growth and development, the promotion of private sector investment and the raising of the productivity of the people by improving their skills, initiative and ethics. These values largely represent the core essence of governance. Significantly, Okafor (2021), believes that, these key attributes are critical to capacity of governance to engender and strengthen the social contract, popular trust, state legitimacy and enhance socio-economic and political development in Nigeria.

Additionally, infrastructural development has job-creation and poverty alleviation potentials through several governance-mediated mechanisms: firstly, by targeting infrastructure in sectors or locations where youth labour can be absorbed (such as agriculture, small manufacturing, ICT hubs); secondly, by ensuring quality implementation including transparent procurement, cost control, and maintenance; and third, via institutional complements such as access to finance, vocational training, regulatory stability, and market access. When governance is weak in any of the outlined respects, infrastructure investment produce low off-take in employment, and even result in “white elephant” projects that drain resources without sustainable impact.

The rate of weak governance in Nigeria is made manifest in forms like; corruption, poor maintenance regimes, policy discontinuity (whereby projects begun under one administration are abandoned by successors), lack of financial oversight and poor human capital investment. These features strengthen under-development, youth unemployment, youth restiveness, educational decay, erode the returns on infrastructure spending, reduce its reliability, and discourage private investment. In line with this Omoju et al. (2023) argued that limited governance capacity, weak oversight, and implementation gaps are key reasons many successive government programmes fail to reduce youth unemployment meaningfully.

In sum, while the infrastructure clearly matters, its capacity to catalyze youth employment in South East Nigeria depends critically on the nature of governance: how projects are chosen and executed, how inclusive and transparent decision- making is, and how well accompanying institutions support youth engagement. The core research question that comes to mind becomes: how does governance practices influence infrastructural development and how does this development serve as a sustainable mechanism for addressing youth unemployment in South Eastern States, Nigeria?

Youth unemployment remains one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges confronting the South East region of Nigeria. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), over 35% of employable youths in the region are either unemployed or underemployed. This situation has contributed to rising insecurity, poverty, and the migration of skilled young people to other regions or abroad in search of better opportunities. Despite the abundance of human and material resources, infrastructural deficits such as poor road networks, inadequate electricity supply, dilapidated educational facilities, and limited access to technology have hindered economic productivity.

Since 1990's, unemployment of any form has always been part of the South East region. Average family give birth to more children with the anticipation that they will help them in their farms, with the advent of petroleum oil in the country since early 1970s, the growth of National income and the increase of non- agricultural jobs in urban area; most youth drifted to the urban areas with the hope for greener pastures to the neglect of agriculture in the rural areas. Unfortunately, the white collar jobs they expected have not been able to serve them round and so many became stranded in these cities and unemployment ensues. This menace has been attributed to poor governance structure in South East region particularly and Nigeria at large (Oluwasegun et al, 2021).

Despite the fact that there seems to be a marginal rise in employment, it is considered to be inadequate enough to absorb the increasing proportion of youth scuttling for narrow space in the labour market. It is believed that corrupt government officials seek bribes in the process of allocating human capital. They are less concerned with investing in the education of the labour force. Self-motivated officials face lower probability of being spotted in the selection process when the job opportunities offered don't require a highly qualified person (Eze, 2020).

Governance failures, including corruption, political patronage, and policy discontinuity, have exacerbated this problem. Many infrastructural projects initiated by state governments are either abandoned midway or completed without sustainable impact. Consequently, the link between governance, infrastructural development, and youth employment remains weak and underexplored. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate how governance practices influence infrastructural development and how such development can serve as a sustainable mechanism for addressing youth unemployment in South East Nigeria. To attend this objective, the first session of the paper addresses introduction, conceptual issues and theoretical framework, the next is methodology, the nexus between governance and infrastructure development, while the third session examines conclusion and recommendation.

2.0. CONCEPTUALIZATION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptual Clarifications

Governance
Governance refers to the process of decision-making and implementation carried out by government institutions, civil society, and other actors (UNDP, 1997). Good governance emphasizes transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, and rule of law (World Bank, 2000).

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Ebiziem (2025), define governance as "the interactions among the different structures traditions and institutions that determine how power and responsibilities are enforced, how decisions are taken and how stakeholders have their way". Ebiziem further argued that governance implies commitment to public good, transparency and accountability, rule of law, participation and dialogue, promoting social inclusiveness and social capital among others. World bank cited in Sakpere (2018) defined governance as the manner in which power is exercise in the management of a country's economic and social resources. The World Bank has identified three distant aspects of governance: The form of Political regime; the process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development; and the capacity of government to design, formulate and implements policies and discharge functions.

Commenting on good governance, Adebeyo (2017) argued that before governance can be considered good, government has got to be effective. This implies that, it must first command the respect and allegiance of the people over whom it exercises governance as well as satisfy certain basic collective needs. He further identified some minimal elements and/or essentials of effective (good) governance as inclusive of: "provision of security for the people", "defense of the territorial borders of the state", "protection of lives and property," "enforcement of laws to enhance predictability" and, "economic development". According to this scholar, "governance requires the ability to ensure the wherewithal of sustained government".

Fundamentally, he equally opined that "effective (good) governance requires that public authority be able to raise the revenues necessary to pay for services that must be provided". The essence of this argument is that, "effective governance must be able to make possible the performance by the state of certain basic services" transportation, communication, education and health services "relatively cheaply and reliably" (Erero, 2016). Therefore, in totality from the different perspective, governance emasculates the following:

- Governance is a process as well as a mechanism to advance the common good.
- It is undertaken by the institutions of the state.
- It involves the exercise of power and authority.
- It has to do with the way and manner social and economic resources are authoritatively shared and distributed in order to achieve certain objective that may be of political, or economic or social nature or a combination of them.
- It is public oriented at least in principle
- It is mechanism for balancing and harmonizing of interest as well as reconciling differences and resolving conflicts that assumes a largely public character.
- It is participatory in the sense that it depends for its effectiveness on the active evolvement of all the stakeholders in the political enterprise
- It is a basis criterion for the measurement or assessment of the effectiveness of a government in terms of promoting and granting the common good.

Infrastructure Development

Infrastructure refers to physical and organizational facilities needed for the operation of a society including transport systems, electricity, water supply, and ICT. In development studies, infrastructure is both a means and an outcome of economic growth.

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The World Bank (2021), offers a broader and more service-oriented perspective. It defines infrastructure as the basic physical networks such as transport, energy, telecommunications, and water systems that provide essential services to households and industries. The World Bank includes both the quantity and quality of infrastructure services, recognizing that reliability, accessibility, and affordability are equally vital. Therefore, infrastructure development, according to the World Bank, involves not only constructing facilities but also ensuring that these services contribute to poverty reduction, improved living standards, and sustainable economic growth.

Calderón and Servén (2014), extend the discussion by distinguishing between infrastructure quantity (coverage and expansion of networks) and infrastructure quality (efficiency, reliability, and performance). They empirically demonstrate that both dimensions significantly affect economic growth and income distribution. For them, infrastructure development means expanding and upgrading facilities to improve access and reduce inequality. Their contribution lies in providing a measurable approach using indices and indicators that connects infrastructure development with socio-economic outcomes, making the concept operational for empirical analysis.

The OECD conceptualizes infrastructure as the fundamental systems and services that enable the flow of goods, people, and information within an economy. This definition underscores the enabling and integrative function of infrastructure; it is not only an economic input but also a framework for societal well-being, sustainability, and resilience. The OECD's approach links infrastructure development to broader policy goals such as environmental protection, digital transformation, and inclusive growth. Thus, infrastructure is portrayed as a multidimensional system essential for both economic efficiency and human welfare.

Youth Unemployment

The International Labor Organization (ILO) describes an unemployed individual as a person 15 years or older, who does not have a job in a specific week but is ready to begin employment within a short period. They must have actively searched for employment at some point in the last four (4) weeks or have already secured a job that will commence within the next three (3) months (Insee, 2021). Similarly, the new Nigeria Labor Force Survey (NLFS) used by the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics describes the "unemployed" as individuals who are not employed but actively searching for paid work and are available to start such work, either last week or within the next two weeks (NBS, 2023).

In another dimension, United Nations (2020) observe that youth refer to the period of transition from infancy to adulthood, during which individuals become independent. The Commonwealth puts the range as between 15 and 29 years (Akinyetun, 2020), the youth according to the African Youth Charter (2006) is any individual between the ages of 15 and 35, while the Nigerian National Youth Policy (2019) puts the age range between 18 and 35 years.

Youth Employment

The concept of youth employment has become central to contemporary development discourse, particularly in developing economies such as Nigeria where the youth constitute a significant proportion of the labor force. Youth employment refers to the engagement of young people in productive and remunerative work that contributes to personal development, economic growth, and national stability. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) defines youth employment as the participation of individuals aged 15 to 35 years in decent and gainful work, whether in wage employment, self-employment, or entrepreneurship. This definition emphasizes decent work that is, work that offers fair income, security, and opportunities for advancement.

According to Adebayo (2019), youth employment involves not merely the absence of unemployment but the presence of meaningful and sustainable work that aligns with the productive capacity of young individuals. Employment in this context transcends temporary or menial jobs; it encompasses the ability of youths to engage in stable economic activities that improve living standards and contribute to national productivity. Similarly, Okafor (2021) notes that youth employment is a vital indicator of socio-economic development because it determines the extent to which a country utilizes its human capital in the productive sectors of the economy.

In Nigeria, the concept of youth employment has taken on a multidimensional meaning due to persistent economic instability, policy inconsistency, and structural weaknesses in the labor market. The National Youth Policy (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2019) defines youth employment as the creation of opportunities for young people to access decent jobs, develop entrepreneurial skills, and participate in the economic life of the nation. This definition underscores the need for institutional frameworks that link education, governance, and the labor market.

The challenge of youth employment, however, extends beyond job availability to include underemployment, skills mismatch, and job insecurity. As Aminu and Raphael (2020) observe, many young Nigerians are engaged in jobs that do not match their educational qualifications or career aspirations, leading to low productivity and job dissatisfaction. Inadequate infrastructure, weak governance systems, and limited access to credit facilities further exacerbate the problem of youth unemployment in the country (World Bank, 2022).

From a developmental perspective, youth employment is not only an economic issue but also a social and political one. Fajana (2018) posits that youth employment contributes to social stability, reduces crime, and enhances civic participation. Conversely, persistent youth unemployment breeds frustration, social unrest, and migration, posing serious challenges to national security and development. In the South East region of Nigeria, for instance, inadequate employment opportunities have contributed to the rise of informal economic activities, political thuggery, and youth migration to urban centers and foreign countries (Nnamani & Okoli, 2023).

Furthermore, the concept of youth employment is closely linked to infrastructure development and governance quality. The African Development Bank (AfDB, 2021) emphasizes that adequate infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, water supply, and information technology serves as a foundation for employment creation, especially for the youth. Effective governance ensures that infrastructure projects are strategically planned, transparently executed, and sustainably maintained, thereby generating both direct and indirect employment opportunities for young people (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020).

In conceptual terms, youth employment can thus be understood as a process and an outcome of integrated policies that enhance the employability, productivity, and entrepreneurship of young people. As Chigbu (2022) argues, youth employment is both a developmental objective and a governance responsibility; it reflects how well the state manages its resources and institutions to meet the needs of its most dynamic population segment. The concept therefore encapsulates the relationship between governance efficiency, infrastructure development, and the socio-economic empowerment of young people.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This paper anchored on Developmental State Theory to conceptualize how effective governance and infrastructural investment stimulate youth employment in South East Nigeria.

The Developmental State Theory, first articulated by Chalmers Johnson (1982) in his study of post-war Japan, argues that sustained economic development is often the result of deliberate, strategic state intervention in the economy. The theory posits that a strong, capable, and visionary state can direct investment, coordinate industrial policy, and mobilize resources toward national development objectives. Later scholars such as Peter Evans (1995) and Ha-Joon Chang (2002) extended this concept to emphasize the role of institutional capacity, bureaucratic competence, and public-private collaboration in development planning.

Core Assumptions

The core assumptions of the theory as follows;

- The state should not merely regulate but actively guide development.
- Effective bureaucracy and institutional autonomy are crucial for sustained growth.
- Infrastructure is a strategic instrument of state-led development.

In the context of South East Nigeria, the developmental state framework suggests that governance quality characterized by institutional strength, policy coherence, and leadership vision plays a decisive role in transforming infrastructure into a tool for employment generation. When the state acts as a developmental catalyst rather than a rent-seeker, it can strategically deploy infrastructure projects to enhance economic productivity, promote industrialization, and reduce unemployment among youth. For example, the Anambra Integrated Development Strategy (ANIDS) and the Ebonyi SEEDS program reflect elements of a developmental state approach, where the government deliberately used infrastructural and human-capital investment to stimulate economic growth. Thus, this theory helps explain *how and why* some states in the South East achieve better youth employment outcomes through infrastructural governance than others.

This theory provides the structural explanation for the link between governance and youth employment showing that where government institutions are developmental and accountable, infrastructure projects translate into tangible job opportunities.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

The study used secondary sources for data collection. This content analytical approached was used in the work to enable us have a reliable and verifiable scientific method for accessing, analyzing and interpreting the volume of materials used for this study. We gathered the data from various sources

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such as books, journal articles, official publications, periodicals, newspapers, and online resources. In order to examine the data produced, qualitative data was analyzed through thematic coding to find recurring themes, obstacles, and contributions governance and infrastructural development in fostering youth employment in South East Nigeria.

4.0. CONTENT ANALYSIS AND DISCOURSES

4.1. Nexus between Governance and Infrastructural Development in South East Zone

The relationship between governance quality and infrastructural development is not only widely recognized as a critical determinant of economic transformation but also an imperative element for social progress, particularly in developing regions such as Nigeria's South East zone. Governance quality refers to the ability of public institutions to manage resources efficiently, design and implement sound policies, and provide public goods and services transparently and accountably (World Bank, 2021). Infrastructure development, on the other hand, encompasses the establishment and maintenance of physical facilities such as roads, electricity, water supply, and communication systems that form the backbone of economic activity and human well-being (Calderón & Servén, 2014).

Theoretically, good governance serves as both a driver and a precondition for sustainable infrastructure development. Effective governance ensures that infrastructure projects are strategically planned, financially transparent, and technically sustainable. According to Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi (2020), governance quality can be assessed through key dimensions such as government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, control of corruption, and accountability all of which directly influence infrastructure delivery outcomes.

In contexts where governance is weak like the South East States, Nigeria infrastructure projects often suffer from poor design, inadequate supervision, inflated costs, and corruption. This dynamic is evident in many parts of South East States and Nigeria at large, where the poor state of public infrastructure has been linked to the erosion of institutional integrity and policy inconsistency (Eme & Ugwu, 2020). Conversely, where governance is effective characterized by sound planning, citizen participation, and robust accountability mechanisms infrastructure tends to be more sustainable and beneficial to local communities (UNDP, 2020).

Historically, the South East zone of Nigeria, consisting of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States, has been known for its entrepreneurial culture and human resource potential; however, weak governance structures and inconsistent policy implementation have often hindered the realization of its infrastructural potential (Onyeizugbe & Orogbu, 2021). For example, the Imo State Infrastructure Renewal Program (2015–2019) initiated under Governor Rochas Okorocha aimed to modernize road networks and urban facilities. However, post-project evaluations revealed that many projects were poorly executed or abandoned due to inadequate supervision and allegations of misappropriation of funds (Ezeani, 2021). This reflects how governance inefficiencies can undermine infrastructure outcomes despite substantial public investment.

In contrast, Anambra State's Integrated Development Strategy (ANIDS) under Governor Peter Obi (2006–2014) is often cited as an example of governance-driven infrastructure success. The program implemented a multi-sectoral approach where education, health, roads, and water infrastructure were

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developed simultaneously, supported by transparent budget management and community participation (Okafor, 2019). The relative success of ANIDS demonstrates how strong governance structures marked by accountability, fiscal discipline, and participatory planning can accelerate infrastructure growth and foster economic inclusion.

Similarly, in Ebonyi State, governance reforms between 2015 and 2023 under Governor Dave Umahi focused on rural road construction, industrial clusters, and electricity projects. The administration adopted a technocratic approach, emphasizing project monitoring and local content participation, which improved the state's infrastructural landscape and enhanced connectivity for agribusinesses (Nweke & Uchenna, 2022). These examples underline that governance quality—specifically in the areas of transparency, project supervision, and fiscal discipline—directly correlates with the success of infrastructure projects.

Governance plays an imperative role in the economic development of any society, particularly in employment generation and poverty reduction. In South East Nigeria comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States, the relationship between governance quality and youth employment is especially pronounced due to the region's dependence on government-led infrastructure projects and public policy interventions. Effective governance serves as the engine through which infrastructure, social programs, and economic reforms are translated into tangible employment opportunities for the youth population. Conversely, governance failures manifesting in corruption, policy inconsistency, and weak institutions have stifled job creation and perpetuated socio-economic stagnation in the region.

Governance encompasses the processes and institutions through which authority is exercised in managing a state's resources and affairs (World Bank, 2020). In the context of South East Nigeria, good governance translates to transparent policymaking, consistent project implementation, and citizen participation in development planning. Infrastructure projects such as road construction, market rehabilitation, power supply, and ICT development are particularly important because they not only stimulate direct employment (through labor demand) but also indirectly create business opportunities for artisans, contractors, and small enterprises (Eboh & Nwosu, 2021).

4.2. The Trajectory of Innovative Governance and it's Impacts in South East Zone
Despite these challenges, there have been notable governance efforts aimed at linking infrastructure development with youth employment:

i. **Anambra Integrated Development Strategy (ANIDS):** Introduced under Governor Peter Obi's administration (2006–2014), ANIDS adopted a holistic approach to development by aligning all sectors education, health, infrastructure, and agriculture under a unified strategic framework. Through ANIDS, the state rehabilitated over 800 kilometers of roads, established skill acquisition centers, and supported small and medium enterprises (SMEs). These initiatives significantly reduced youth unemployment between 2010 and 2014 (Onyishi, 2016).

ii. **Ebonyi State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS):** Ebonyi SEEDS focused on infrastructure and youth empowerment through agricultural mechanization and vocational training. Between 2017 and 2022, the program created over 30,000 direct and indirect jobs in agriculture and construction (NBS, 2022). The state's investment in the

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Abakaliki rice mill cluster is a practical example of governance translating into employment, as it provided economic opportunities for local youth and smallholder farmers.

iii. **Enugu State Infrastructure Renewal Initiative (ESIRI):** This program, launched in 2020, emphasized urban renewal, market infrastructure, and transport modernization. The construction of the Opi–Nsukka–Enugu dual carriageway alone created over 4,000 temporary jobs for youth artisans and engineers, while improving regional commerce (Enugu State Economic Report, 2022).

iv. **Skill-Up-Imo:** Skill-Up Imo is an Imo State government initiative to train youths in digital skills to address unemployment and foster a digital economy. The program provides both foundational and advanced training in areas like computer appreciation, web development, content creation, cybersecurity, and AI. The initiative aims to upskill 300,000 youths and has successfully trained thousands, with graduates receiving stipends and equipment like laptops (https://mdeeg.im.gov.ng/skillup-imo, 2025).

v. **Infrastructure as a Catalyst for Youth Employment:** Infrastructure serves as a critical catalyst for economic growth and job creation, particularly in developing regions where public investment remains the dominant driver of development. The link between infrastructure and youth employment is well established in development economics infrastructural investments create immediate (direct) jobs in construction and engineering, while simultaneously generating long-term (indirect) opportunities through improved market access, reduced transaction costs, and the stimulation of new business ecosystems (Calderón & Servén, 2014). In the South East of Nigeria, where unemployment among youth remains significantly above the national average (NBS, 2023), infrastructure development has emerged as one of the most viable strategies for addressing the job crisis. However, the transformative potential of infrastructure depends on governance quality, project continuity, and strategic alignment with human capital development. Poorly managed projects or politically motivated "white-elephant" constructions often fail to yield employment dividends.

vi. **Employment in Construction and Civil Works:** Infrastructure projects such as road construction, market development, housing schemes, and public utilities directly engage large numbers of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled youths. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), the construction sector contributed approximately 9.1% to Nigeria's GDP and absorbed an estimated 1.4 million workers, most of whom were youths between ages 18 and 35. In the South East, road rehabilitation projects such as the Aba–Port Harcourt Expressway (Abia State), Onitsha–Awka Dual Carriageway (Anambra State), and the Abakaliki Ring Road Project (Ebonyi State) have collectively provided thousands of temporary and permanent job opportunities for young artisans, masons, welders, and engineers (World Bank, 2022). A World Bank (2021) report on the Ebonyi State Ring Road Project (2021) estimated that over 5,000 direct jobs were created during the project's peak construction phase, in addition to secondary jobs in material supply and logistics. Similar effects were observed in Enugu's Opi–Nsukka–Enugu Dualization Project, which created about 3,800 short-term jobs and 800 technical positions (Enugu State Ministry of Works, 2022). These data demonstrate that infrastructural investments have a measurable employment multiplier effect when strategically executed.

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vii. **Public Works and Urban Renewal Programs:** Government-led urban renewal and public works programs also play an essential role in engaging unemployed youth. For instance, the Imo State Rural Roads and Drainage Rehabilitation Scheme (2019–2023) under Governor Hope Uzodinma's administration employed over 12,000 youths in direct construction and maintenance activities (Imo State Economic Bulletin, 2023). Similarly, Anambra State's Community–Choose–Your–Project Initiative, introduced in 2017, allowed local communities to identify and execute priority infrastructure projects a participatory governance model that generated community-based jobs for artisans and contractors while promoting social accountability (Anambra State Development Report, 2020).

viii. **Rural Electrification and Energy Projects:** Energy infrastructure especially rural electrification has been another significant avenue for direct youth employment. The Rural Electrification Agency (REA) projects in Abia, Enugu, and Ebonyi States have engaged hundreds of local technicians, engineers, and electricians in installing mini-grids and solar-powered streetlights. For instance, the Abia Solar Hybrid Project (2022) created approximately 450 technical jobs during installation and continues to sustain maintenance-related employment for local youth cooperatives (REA, 2023). Reliable electricity supply also facilitates the expansion of micro-industries, welding workshops, and cold storage businesses sectors dominated by young entrepreneurs.

ix. **Transport Infrastructure and Market Accessibility:** Efficient transport systems are central to regional economic competitiveness. In the South East, improved road networks have drastically reduced travel time and transportation costs, allowing small businesses and agricultural producers easier access to urban markets. For example, the reconstruction of the Enugu–Onitsha Expressway and the Owerri–Orlu Road significantly boosted commercial activity along those corridors, leading to the establishment of new retail outlets, logistics firms, and service businesses (Nwosu & Eze, 2022). The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) highlights that transport infrastructure has one of the highest employment multipliers in developing economies, with each $1 million investment capable of generating 40–100 indirect jobs through supply-chain and market-access effects. In South East Nigeria, these jobs are often absorbed by youth as transport operators, vendors, mechanics, and small-scale traders.

x. **ICT Infrastructure and the Digital Economy:** The expansion of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure has revolutionized youth employment dynamics. Broadband expansion, mobile network penetration, and digital skills programs have empowered a generation of young entrepreneurs, freelancers, and software developers. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC, 2023), internet penetration in the South East zone increased from 52% in 2019 to 69% in 2023, resulting in a proliferation of digital start-ups in Enugu, Awka, and Owerri. The Enugu Digital Hub Project (2021), established through a collaboration between the state government and private partners, has trained over 2,000 youths in software development, graphic design, and e-commerce management. Similarly, the Anambra ICT Innovation Centre, launched in 2020, incubated over 120 tech startups, creating employment opportunities in programming, website design, and digital marketing (Anambra ICT Ministry Report, 2022). These initiatives underscore the growing role of ICT infrastructure as a job enabler, especially in the post-COVID digital economy. The rise of digital hubs in Enugu and Aba shows how ICT infrastructure boosts youth employment. Initiatives such as the Roar Nigeria Hub

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(UNN) and Genesys Tech Hub (Enugu) have trained and employed thousands of youths in programming, digital marketing, and tech support (Okafor, 2020).

xi. **Energy and Industrial Infrastructure for SMEs:** Beyond digital and transport infrastructure, industrial clusters and energy facilities have stimulated youth entrepreneurship and small business growth. The Aba Industrial Cluster (Aba Leather and Shoe Hub), supported by the Abia State government and the Bank of Industry (BOI), now employs over 15,000 artisans and entrepreneurs, most of whom are under 40 (BOI Report, 2022). Reliable infrastructure — including electricity, water, and access roads — has been critical to this success. Ebonyi State's Abakaliki Rice Mill Cluster presents a similar case where improved industrial infrastructure has enabled youth-led agribusinesses to thrive (Ebonyi SEEDS Evaluation Report, 2022).

4.3. Synthesis of the Challenges Affecting the Effective Implementation of Infrastructural Projects in South East Zone

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023), the South East zone has one of the highest unemployment rates in Nigeria, averaging between 31 percent and 56 percent across its five states in the last decade. The level of unemployment in this zone is a resultant effect of:

Policy Inconsistency and the Discontinuity of Infrastructure Projects: One of the most persistent challenges undermining employment generation in South East Nigeria is policy inconsistency. Frequent changes in political leadership often result in the abandonment of ongoing infrastructure projects initiated by previous administrations. For instance, many of the industrial park and road network projects initiated during Governor Rochas Okorocha's administration in Imo State (2011–2019) were either discontinued or rebranded by subsequent governments, leaving them unfinished (Okeke & Nnamani, 2022). This pattern of governance instability not only wastes public resources but also eliminates the employment opportunities such projects could have generated during and after completion.

Policy inconsistency also undermines investor confidence. As noted by Ojukwu and Obiwuru (2020), private investors are reluctant to engage in public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the South East due to uncertainty about government commitment. This has contributed to the stalling of infrastructure projects like the Enugu Industrial Cluster and the Aba Geometric Power Plant, both of which could have absorbed a significant segment of the unemployed youth population.

Corruption and Resource Mismanagement: Corruption remains a major obstacle to employment-oriented governance in Nigeria. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2021**)** ranked Nigeria 154 out of 180 countries, highlighting endemic misappropriation of public funds. In the South East, budgetary allocations for road construction, market modernization, and youth skill empowerment are often diverted or underutilized. For example, an investigative report by *Dataphyte (2020)* revealed that several rural electrification and road projects in Abia and Ebonyi States were either abandoned or executed at inflated costs, reducing the employment multiplier effect such projects were designed to achieve.

The impact of corruption is particularly evident in youth empowerment programs. The *South East Youth Empowerment Scheme* launched in Enugu and Abia between 2019 and 2022 was riddled with

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allegations of favoritism and fund diversion (Uche & Chukwu, 2023). Consequently, fewer beneficiaries acquired the necessary skills or capital support to become self-reliant. This governance failure perpetuates dependence on political patronage and undermines long-term economic productivity.

Weak Institutional Capacity and Monitoring Deficits: Weak institutions, characterized by poor project monitoring and inadequate evaluation frameworks, further exacerbate the problem. Institutions such as state Ministries of Works and Economic Development often lack the technical expertise and accountability systems to ensure proper project implementation. As a result, several "white-elephant" projects expensive infrastructure with limited socio-economic value—dot the South East landscape. For instance, the *Imo International Cargo Airport project* and parts of the *Anambra Millennium City project* have been criticized for failing to deliver meaningful employment outcomes due to poor planning and institutional oversight (Eze, 2022). This institutional fragility reflects what Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) describe as "extractive governance," where political elites prioritize rent-seeking over developmental goals.

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This study has examined the intricate relationship between governance, infrastructure development, and youth employment in South East Nigeria. The analysis revealed that governance quality significantly determines the pace and sustainability of infrastructure-driven job creation across the region. Good governance characterized by transparency, accountability, participation, and policy coherence serves as the foundation upon which inclusive infrastructural growth and employment generation rest (World Bank, 2020; Kaufmann & Kraay, 2014).

In the South East, where youth constitute a majority of the working-age population, infrastructural development has shown both transformative and constraining effects, depending on the governance structures in place. States such as Anambra and Ebonyi have demonstrated that well-coordinated development frameworks such as the Anambra Integrated Development Strategy (ANIDS) and Ebonyi SEEDS can effectively translate capital projects into tangible employment opportunities. Conversely, states with inconsistent policy direction and weak institutional oversight have experienced developmental stagnation, leading to the underutilization of youth potential and rising unemployment rates (NBS, 2023; Uzonwanne, 2021).

Moreover, empirical insights highlight that infrastructure projects—particularly in transport, ICT, and energy possess strong employment multiplier effects when implemented transparently and inclusively. Road construction, market development, industrial clusters, and digital connectivity not only create direct construction jobs but also foster entrepreneurial ecosystems that empower young people to innovate, produce, and trade (African Development Bank, 2022). However, recurrent governance failures manifested in project abandonment, corruption, and politicization of job creation continue to undermine the sustainability of such gains (Transparency International, 2023; Eze, 2020).

In summary, the paper concludes that the challenge of youth unemployment in South East Nigeria is not merely a product of economic downturns, but also a function of governance inefficiencies and

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infrastructural deficits. Effective governance, therefore, remains a crucial precondition for harnessing infrastructure as a sustainable catalyst for employment generation. Strengthening institutional frameworks, enhancing policy coordination, and ensuring inclusive participation in project planning and execution are essential to reversing the cycle of youth underemployment in the region.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. State and local governments in the South East should institutionalize governance principles such as accountability, transparency, and continuity in project implementation. Establishing independent infrastructure monitoring agencies and adopting performance-based budgeting can help reduce corruption and improve efficiency.
2. Governments should design long-term development blueprints that transcend political administrations. The continuity of projects such as ANIDS (Anambra), SEEDS (Ebonyi), and RAMP (Rural Access and Mobility Projects) should be safeguarded through legislative backing and public participation to avoid policy reversals that disrupt employment generation.
3. States in the South East should invest heavily in technical and vocational education to align youth skills with infrastructure needs. Establishing regional technical colleges and innovation hubs in partnership with private firms can bridge the skills gap and reduce structural unemployment.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that no conflict of interest exist in this manuscript.

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