



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA (2015–2024)

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#### ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of democratic governance on socio-economic development in Nigeria from 2015 to 2024. This is predicated upon the assumption that democratic rule advance or foster socio-economic development. The objectives of the study are to examine the impact of democratic governance on socio-economic development, and to evaluate the challenges limiting the effectiveness of democratic governance in promoting socio-economic development in Nigeria. The paper utilized secondary data from reliable sources such as the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), World Bank, Transparency International, and UNDP to analyze trends and patterns. The study adopted the Institutional Theory as its theoretical framework, which emphasizes the role of formal and informal institutions in shaping governance outcomes. The findings show a persistent increase in poverty rates, unemployment, inflation, and high cost of living, alongside sustained corruption, which undermines the benefits of governance reforms. Despite continuous democratic rule, Nigeria's socio-economic indicators significantly worsened between 2015 and 2024. Poverty rose from 48.3% to 65.5%, unemployment peaked at 33.3%, inflation reached 31.7%, and corruption remained entrenched. The study identifies several challenges, such as bad economic policies, policy inconsistency, corruption, weak institutions, poor accountability mechanisms, and a lack of effective governance, which have hindered socio-economic development in Nigeria. The study concludes that democratic governance in Nigeria has not effectively translated into improved socio-economic conditions. It recommends economic diversification, strengthening institutional frameworks, promoting inclusive economic reforms, enhancing transparency and accountability, tackling inflation and cost of living, and investing in human capital development.

**Keywords:** Governance, democracy, socio-economic development, Nigeria

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## INTRODUCTION

Democratic governance has gained prominence globally due to its promotion of participation, accountability, and human rights. Many African nations, including Nigeria, have adopted democratic rule to foster development and socio-political stability. Nigeria has experienced several democratic transitions since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1960. These transitions have significantly influenced its socio-economic landscape and sustainable development outcomes. Nigeria's political history is marked by cycles of military rule and democratic governance. The first democratic era began in 1960 but was interrupted by a military coup in 1966, leading to a series of military regimes that lasted until 1979. Another short-lived democratic period occurred between 1979 and 1983, followed by a return to military rule that persisted until 1999. The transition to democracy in 1999 marked the beginning of the Fourth Republic, which has been the longest continuous period of democratic governance in Nigeria's history (Adeniyi, 2020).

Nigeria's economy is characterized by its heavy reliance on oil exports, which constitute a significant portion of government revenue and foreign exchange earnings. Despite this wealth, Nigeria faces substantial socio-economic challenges, including high levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality (Ogunlesi, 2019). Additionally, the country grapples with infrastructural deficits, weak institutions, and widespread corruption, which have impeded socio-economic development (Transparency International, 2020). Although there have been efforts to diversify the economy away from its reliance on oil, progress has been limited. The agricultural, manufacturing, and service sectors remain underdeveloped, and the economy is still highly vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices (Ojo, 2019). This economic vulnerability poses a significant challenge to achieving socio-economic development.

Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999 after decades of military dictatorship, sparking hope for a new era of political stability, development, and improved living standards for its citizens. Democratic governance is expected to foster economic growth, enhance the rule of law, promote inclusive development, and reduce corruption. Democratic governance is expected to provide a framework for the rule of law, protection of human rights, transparency, and responsive leadership. As scholars like Diamond (2008) have argued, democracy holds the potential to deliver public goods more effectively and equitably than authoritarian regimes. However, the Nigerian experience has raised concerns about the actual dividends of democracy. While political transitions have occurred regularly, socio-economic outcomes remain discouraging. Despite programs like the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP), N-Power, and cash transfer schemes, implementation gaps and governance inefficiencies have stifled progress.



Between 2015 and 2024, the country underwent successive democratic transitions under civilian administrations, marked by regular elections, increased voter turnout in some regions, and the presence of opposition parties. Yet, these political advancements have not translated into tangible improvements in the socio-economic conditions of the average Nigerian. According to Ezeani (2013), democratic governance in Nigeria has often been characterized by elite dominance, weak institutions, and policy inconsistency, which limit its developmental impact. Key socio-economic indicators during this period—such as inflation, unemployment, poverty, and the cost of living—worsened drastically. This raises critical questions about the quality of Nigeria’s democracy and whether its governance structures are equipped to deliver economic transformation and social justice.

Democracy is widely acknowledged as a system of government that promotes citizen participation, accountability, and the equitable distribution of resources. It is presumed to provide the platform for inclusive governance and socio-economic development. However, in Nigeria, the trajectory of democratic governance has been fraught with contradictions and underperformance. Despite stable democratic administrations from 2015 to 2024, socio-economic indicators reflect regression (widespread hardship and declining welfare). During this period, Nigeria’s poverty rate increased from 48.3% in 2015 to 65.5% in 2024, while the unemployment rate reached a historic high of 33.3% in 2021, before marginal improvements due to revised labour definitions (NBS, 2024). Inflation rose to 31.7% in early 2024 (NBS, 2024; World Bank, 2024), and the cost of living remained unsustainable for the majority of Nigerians. Corruption indices also show Nigeria consistently ranking among the lowest in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (2023). These patterns raise concerns about the effectiveness of democratic governance in promoting socio-economic well-being

These realities contradict the expected outcomes of democratic governance. Thus this study assesses the impact of democratic governance on socio-economic development in Nigeria from 2015 to 2024. The period between 2015 and 2024 is particularly significant, marking a decade dominated by the All Progressives Congress (APC) under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari and later President Bola Tinubu. This paper assesses the extent to which democratic governance has contributed to or hindered socio-economic development in Nigeria over this period.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To examine the impact of democratic governance on socio-economic development in Nigeria from 2015 to 2024.
2. To evaluate the challenges limiting the effectiveness of democratic governance in promoting socio-economic development.



## **Research Questions**

1. How has democratic governance impacted on socio-economic development in Nigeria from 2015 to 2024?
2. What are the challenges hindering the effectiveness of democratic governance in achieving socio-economic progress?

## **CONCEPTUAL AND THEORITICAL FRAMEWORKS**

### **Conceptual Discourse**

This section conceptualized the basic concepts of the study and explicated the theoretical framework of the study. Such concepts include: Democratic governance and socio-economic development.

### **Concept of Democratic Governance**

Democracy is often defined as a system of government where power is vested in the people, either directly or through elected representatives. It is characterized by principles such as political participation, transparency, accountability, rule of law, and protection of human rights (Diamond, 2019). Democracy ensures that citizens have the right to participate in decision-making processes, either directly or indirectly, through representatives they elect. In the context of Nigeria, democracy has evolved from a military dictatorship to a more participatory system post-1999. However, challenges remain, such as voter apathy, political corruption, and a fragile political culture (Akinyemi, 2020).

Democratic governance refers to the institutions, processes, and behaviours that support the functioning of a democracy. It encompasses accountable leadership, transparency, responsiveness, and inclusiveness in decision-making (UNDP, 2020). A key characteristic of democratic governance is the relationship between the state and citizens, where public officials are held accountable for their actions and citizens have the right to express their grievances. In the Nigerian context, democratic governance involves strengthening institutions like the judiciary, legislative bodies, and electoral commissions to ensure accountability and transparency. However, democratic governance in Nigeria faces numerous challenges, including corruption, weak rule of law, and the politicization of public institutions (Fagbohun, 2021). Studies by Afolabi (2020) and Ojo (2021) have emphasized that the Nigerian democratic system, despite its imperfections, has made progress in areas such as electoral reforms and political participation.



### **The Core Principles of Democratic Governance**

Democratic governance is a system of rule characterized not only by the presence of electoral democracy but also by the operation of principles that ensure the protection of rights, legal equality, public accountability, and citizen empowerment. It emphasizes the centrality of people's participation in decision-making processes and the promotion of inclusive institutions that uphold justice, transparency, and the rule of law. According to Grindle (2017: 5), democratic governance is “a mode of governing that is based on legitimacy, legality, participation, and responsiveness.” These principles serve as both the foundation and the evaluative criteria for any functioning democracy.

**Political Participation:** Political participation refers to the active engagement of citizens in political processes, ranging from voting in elections to involvement in civic dialogues, protests, policy debates, and public office. This principle underpins democratic legitimacy. Dahl (1989:37) emphasizes that participation must be “effective and inclusive,” meaning all citizens should have equal opportunities to influence political decisions, either directly or through representatives.

In Nigeria, political participation has manifested through regular elections since the return to democracy in 1999. Between 2015 and 2023, citizens elected leaders at federal and state levels, reinforcing a sense of ownership of governance. Although voter turnout in recent elections has declined (e.g., 35.7% in the 2023 general elections), the presence of multi-party competition and civic mobilization platforms, such as youth-led #EndSARS protests in 2020, demonstrate that political participation in Nigeria extends beyond the ballot box. These protests, organized via social media, pushed issues of police brutality and governance accountability into national consciousness, embodying Dahl's ideal of citizen influence.

**Transparency:** Transparency involves the openness and accessibility of government decision-making processes and data. It ensures that citizens can understand, monitor, and critique government actions. As Grindle (2017:48) notes, “transparency is essential for reducing corruption, building trust, and enabling effective public engagement.” In practice, the implementation of the Treasury Single Account (TSA) in Nigeria in 2015 represented a landmark in transparency reforms. It centralized government revenues into a single account at the Central Bank, reducing opportunities for fraud and unmonitored spending. Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) were required to report transactions in real-time, enhancing public oversight. Moreover, the open budgeting process introduced under the Buhari administration allowed civil society organizations to track allocations and expenditures. Although implementation gaps persist, these initiatives exemplify democratic transparency mechanisms in action.



**Accountability:** Accountability in democratic governance refers to the obligation of government officials to answer for their actions and decisions to the public and institutional bodies. Bovens (2018:12) defines it as “a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor is obliged to explain and justify conduct, and the forum can sanction the actor.” In Nigeria, institutions like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) have played pivotal roles in enforcing accountability. High-profile cases, such as the prosecution of former Petroleum Minister Diezani Alison-Madueke and the suspension of Central Bank Governor Godwin Emefiele in 2023 over allegations of financial mismanagement, highlight attempts to enforce accountability through legal mechanisms. Additionally, legislative oversight by the National Assembly and the role of investigative journalism, such as Sahara Reporters and Premium Times, demonstrate how democratic systems can expose and correct abuse of power. Nevertheless, critics argue that accountability in Nigeria is often selective and politicized. This critique aligns with Bovens' (2018) warning that accountability loses legitimacy when mechanisms are not applied impartially or consistently.

**Rule of Law:** The rule of law ensures that laws are applied equally to all individuals, protects against arbitrary governance, and safeguards fundamental freedoms. O'Donnell (2020:316) argues that the rule of law “is central to democratic governance because it anchors institutional trust and legal predictability.”

Nigeria's constitution guarantees legal protections for all citizens, but the enforcement of the rule of law has often been undermined by executive overreach and weak judicial independence. Nonetheless, democratic courts have occasionally asserted their autonomy. For example, in 2020, Nigeria's Supreme Court overturned the electoral victory of the Imo State governor, illustrating that even powerful political actors can be held to legal standards.

Additionally, the establishment of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA) in 2015 improved procedural fairness and reduced delays in criminal justice delivery. The ACJA mandates that suspects be tried within a reasonable time, reinforcing legal safeguards against arbitrary detention, which is essential in upholding the rule of law in a democratic context.

**Human Rights:** Democratic governance is fundamentally grounded in the respect and promotion of human rights, encompassing civil, political, economic, and social rights. As Amartya Sen (2019:164) puts it, “freedom is both the end and the means of development,” highlighting that human rights are integral to both personal dignity and societal progress.

Nigeria's democratic era has seen the expansion of human rights discourse, especially around gender equality, press freedom, and minority rights. The enactment of the Anti-Torture Act in



2017 and the domestication of the Child Rights Act in several states represent significant legislative progress. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns, the role of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and activism by groups such as the Bring Back Our Girls movement have amplified rights advocacy.

However, violations persist, especially with security force abuses and the suppression of protests. During the #EndSARS protests, the violent response by security agents, including the controversial Lekki Toll Gate shooting, highlighted the fragility of human rights protections even under a democratic government. Still, the democratic space allows for redress mechanisms, public inquiries, and compensatory frameworks, which are largely absent in authoritarian settings.

The core principles of democratic governance; political participation, transparency, accountability, rule of law, and human rights are not merely abstract ideals; they are practical tools for evaluating the health and functionality of a democracy. In Nigeria, despite persistent governance deficits, these principles have offered pathways for reform, resistance, and representation. The ability of citizens to vote, protest, litigate, and speak freely, though challenged, reflects the enduring relevance of democratic norms in shaping the nation's development trajectory. As Grindle (2017:63) suggests, democratic governance is “always in motion,” requiring continuous effort from both institutions and citizens to uphold and deepen its principles.

### **Concept of Socio-Economic Development**

Generally, development refers to a process of positive change aimed at improving the well-being, standard of living, and overall quality of life for individuals, communities, and societies. Development, in its broadest sense, refers to the process of social, economic, and political advancement aimed at improving the well-being and quality of life of individuals and communities. It encompasses multifaceted changes that occur across various domains, including but not limited to income, education, health, governance, infrastructure, and environmental sustainability. Development encompasses various dimensions that collectively contribute to the overall well-being and progress of individuals, communities, and societies. Some of the key dimensions of development include economic dimension, social dimension, cultural dimension, political dimension, environmental dimension, and sustainable development dimension. The concept of development tend to focus more on socio-economic development and this is seen basically in the aspect of improving standard of living, poverty and malnutrition reduction, creation of employment opportunities, etc.

Socio-economic development refers to improvements and advancements in both economic performance and social well-being, such as poverty reduction, healthcare access, education,



employment, and infrastructure development (Sen 1999; Todaro & Smith 2020). Socio-economic development refers to the process of improving the economic well-being and quality of life of a population. It involves measurable progress in key indicators such as GDP growth, poverty reduction, employment creation, equitable income distribution, access to education and healthcare, infrastructure development, and economic growth (Todaro & Smith, 2015).

### **Key Components of Socio-Economic Development**

**Socio-economic development** refers to the process through which societies improve the economic and social well-being of their populations. It encompasses both the quantitative expansion of economic indicators (such as GDP) and qualitative changes in human development, including health, education, employment, and social inclusion. As Todaro and Smith (2020: 25) note, socio-economic development involves “a multidimensional process that includes major changes in social structures, popular attitudes, and national institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality, and the eradication of poverty.” Thus, it is both about increasing economic output and enhancing the quality of life and freedoms available to all citizens. The key components of socio-economic development include:

**Economic Growth:** Economic growth, defined as the increase in the value of goods and services produced by an economy over time, is a foundational element of socio-economic development. It is typically measured by changes in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and per capita income. Todaro and Smith (2020:146) emphasize that sustained economic growth is essential as it “generates the resources necessary for investments in education, health care, and infrastructure, which are crucial for human development.”

For instance, Nigeria experienced notable GDP growth during the early 2000s, largely driven by oil revenues. Between 2004 and 2010, the country recorded an average annual growth rate of about 7%, which allowed for increased government spending on infrastructure projects such as roads, power supply, and communication networks. However, growth alone did not translate into widespread human development, highlighting the need to link growth with equity and social policy. This aligns with Amartya Sen’s (2019:38) observation that “economic growth is only meaningful when it leads to the expansion of substantive freedoms and capabilities.”

**Poverty Reduction:** Poverty reduction is a central goal of socio-economic development because poverty limits people’s ability to live productive, healthy, and meaningful lives. Ravallion (2016: 3) defines poverty as “a pronounced deprivation in well-being,” which



includes both income deficits and lack of access to essential services such as education, health care, and housing.

In Nigeria, despite being Africa's largest economy, poverty remains widespread. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, over 133 million Nigerians were classified as multidimensionally poor as of 2022. Several poverty reduction initiatives, such as the National Social Investment Program (NSIP) launched in 2016, sought to address this issue. Components like the N-Power scheme and the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program aimed to provide direct support to vulnerable households. While these programs made some progress, structural challenges, such as corruption, unemployment, and regional inequality continue to hamper large-scale poverty alleviation. This underscores Ravallion's (2016:191) argument that "sustainable poverty reduction requires systemic change in governance, access, and opportunity."

**Employment:** Employment, particularly in decent and productive work, is vital for ensuring income generation, social inclusion, and economic security. Sen (2019: 116) maintains that employment is "not merely about earning a living but also about participating in the life of the community," reinforcing its social and developmental importance.

In Nigeria, the unemployment rate has remained a major concern, particularly among the youth. As of 2023, youth unemployment stood above 40%, leading to social unrest and emigration pressures. Informal employment dominates the labour market, with millions engaged in unregulated, low-paying jobs that offer little security. Efforts to stimulate job creation, such as the Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWin) initiative and the National Youth Employment and Skills Development Programme, have had mixed results due to funding inconsistencies and implementation bottlenecks. Still, the emphasis on employment generation remains central to any meaningful socio-economic policy, especially in a country with a rapidly growing population.

**Education:** Education is a transformative force in socio-economic development. It not only increases individual earning potential but also improves health outcomes, civic participation, and national productivity. According to UNESCO (2021:9), "education enhances people's capabilities to live the lives they value and contributes to societal progress through knowledge creation and innovation."

In the Nigerian context, educational development has faced considerable challenges, including underfunding, infrastructural deficits, and teacher shortages. Nonetheless, major investments have been made through programs like the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme, which aims to provide free and compulsory education at the primary and junior secondary levels. Notable gains have been observed in school enrolment rates, especially for



girls in some northern states. However, the quality of education remains uneven, and learning outcomes remain poor. In line with UNESCO's position, without equitable and quality education, the full potential of socio-economic development cannot be realized.

**Healthcare:** Healthcare access is indispensable for improving life expectancy, reducing preventable diseases, and ensuring a productive workforce. As the World Health Organization (2022:3) asserts, "health is a fundamental human right and a critical foundation for sustainable development."

Nigeria's healthcare system suffers from underinvestment and inefficiency. Health expenditure as a percentage of GDP remains below the recommended 15% Abuja Declaration threshold. Primary health care centers, especially in rural areas, are poorly equipped. However, efforts such as the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) and the Basic Healthcare Provision Fund (BHCPF) have been introduced to increase coverage and access. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) coordinated emergency responses and public health communication, showing that responsive health governance is achievable when systems are prioritized.

**Social Inclusion:** Social inclusion means ensuring that all individuals, particularly marginalized groups, have equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from development processes. Martha Nussbaum (2021: 27) stresses that "a just society must be committed to the capabilities of all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or disability."

In Nigeria, structural inequalities remain pronounced, especially for women, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. Women's political representation is still below global averages, and socio-cultural barriers limit their access to education and economic opportunities. Policies like the National Gender Policy and the recent push for gender-responsive budgeting are aimed at correcting these imbalances. Moreover, campaigns for disability rights and youth inclusion in governance are increasingly shaping the development agenda, reinforcing the idea that development must be people-centered and inclusive to be sustainable.

### **Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory**

The study is anchored in Institutional Theory, which emphasizes the role of formal and informal institutions in shaping governance and development outcomes. Developed by scholars like Douglass North, this theory emphasizes the importance of strong institutions for economic performance and governance effectiveness. As North (1990) explains, institutions provide the rules of the game that influence political behaviour and economic performance. It suggests that development is contingent upon the quality of institutions. Institutional theory posits that institutions, both formal (constitutions, laws) and informal (norms, practices),



shape societal outcomes. According to North (1990), institutions rules, norms, and enforcement mechanisms, create incentives that affect political and economic performance.

In Nigeria, formal democratic structures coexist with informal patronage systems that influence political decisions. In other words, while formal democratic institutions exist (e.g., National Assembly, judiciary, INEC), informal practices like patronage, clientelism, and political interference undermine their functionality. Institutions such as the legislature, anti-corruption agencies, judiciary, and civil society are essential for regulating state behaviour and ensuring accountability. Weak institutions, on the other hand, can enable rent-seeking, corruption, and poor policy implementation, thereby undermining development. Thus, weak institutions translate into ineffective policy implementation, corruption, and misallocation of resources. Institutional weaknesses result in governance failures that obstruct development. Despite reforms, entrenched informal practices such as corruption and political favoritism undermine developmental efforts. Thus, institutional theory provides a robust framework for analyzing Nigeria's democratic governance and its impact on socioeconomic development.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a descriptive research design to analyze the impact of democratic governance on socio-economic development outcomes in Nigeria from 2015 to 2024. The research design allows for the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of secondary data from various sources to achieve the study objectives. Thus this design was chosen because it aims to explore and describe the impact of democratic governance on socio-economic development in Nigeria. The secondary data utilized in this research comes from a wide range of reliable and reputable sources, including government reports, academic publications, and international organizations, to provide a robust analysis of the topic. The collected secondary data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify key themes, patterns, and trends related to democratic governance and socio-economic development outcomes in Nigeria from 2015 to 2024.

## **DISCOURSES**

### **Positive Impacts of Democratic Governance on Socio-Economic Development**

Democratic governance in Nigeria between 2015 and 2024, under the leadership of Presidents Muhammadu Buhari and Bola Ahmed Tinubu, enabled certain gains in economic and social sectors despite deep-rooted systemic challenges. Notable achievements were recorded in areas such as public sector reforms, anti-corruption efforts, infrastructure development, and agricultural support, though these were uneven across regions and demographics.



- **Institutional -Corruption Efforts**

A key achievement under democratic Reforms and Anti-governance was the institutionalization of fiscal control mechanisms. The implementation of the Treasury Single Account (TSA) centralized government revenues and significantly reduced leakages from Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs). Omitola (2019) observed that the TSA policy improved revenue remittances and accountability in public finance. Similarly, the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) helped eliminate ghost workers in the civil service, saving the federal government billions of naira. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) also intensified investigations and arrests, particularly under Buhari. While major convictions remained rare, high-profile prosecutions, such as those involving former governors and public office holders, reinforced anti-corruption as a public discourse. Akinyemi and Adeniran (2021) noted that despite institutional limitations, these reforms contributed to a gradual culture of accountability in the public sector.

- **Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Growth and Economic Recovery Plans**

Nigeria's GDP growth was modest but showed resilience amid global economic shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic. The country suffered two recessions in 2016 and 2020, but democratic continuity allowed the Buhari administration to launch the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) (2017–2020), targeting macroeconomic stability, economic diversification, and infrastructure investment. According to Ucha and Emeh (2020), the ERGP helped Nigeria recover from recession in 2017 with a growth rate of 0.8%, reaching 2.2% in 2019 before falling due to the pandemic. The ERGP emphasized diversification away from oil dependence, spurring public investments in agriculture, power, and transport. The Tinubu administration's economic reforms, including subsidy removal and exchange rate harmonization in 2023, were aimed at long-term stabilization, even though they led to short-term inflation and public discontent.

- **Poverty Reduction and Employment Schemes**

Democratic governance enabled the rollout of several social investment programmes to address poverty and unemployment. The National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP), including N-Power, TraderMoni, and Conditional Cash Transfers, sought to empower youth and vulnerable households. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), over 2 million youths were engaged through N-Power between 2016 and 2022. Although these programmes had limited reach and sustainability due to corruption and funding gaps, they represent the democratization of social policy and a recognition of state responsibility toward economic inclusion. Adebayo and Adeola (2022, p. 68) concluded that these interventions had a “modest but symbolic effect in promoting social welfare, particularly in Northern Nigeria.”



- **Education Sector Expansion and Reforms**

Democratic rule supported federal and state-level investments in education, including infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and school feeding programmes. The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) disbursed funds for the construction and renovation of classrooms, while programmes like the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme encouraged school enrollment. Between 2015 and 2021, the federal government claimed to have enrolled over 9 million children in the school feeding programme (Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, 2021). However, strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and underfunding of tertiary institutions continued to affect education quality. Nevertheless, democratic governance maintained education as a public good, with annual budgetary allocations and legislative oversight.

- **Infrastructure Development and Transportation**

Democratic governance enabled long-term capital projects in transport, power, and housing. The completion of the Abuja-Kaduna railway and the rehabilitation of the Lagos-Ibadan expressway were milestones under the Buhari administration. The Nigeria Railway Corporation was revitalized with Chinese funding, signaling renewed attention to mass transit. Projects like the Second Niger Bridge and the Kano-Maradi rail line continued under Tinubu, reflecting policy continuity made possible by democratic transitions. Ucha and Emeh (2020:77) argue that infrastructure expansion during this period represented “one of the most visible outcomes of democratic governance.”

- **Agricultural Development and Food Security**

The Central Bank of Nigeria’s Anchor Borrowers Programme supported over 4 million farmers between 2015 and 2022. This policy promoted food production, particularly rice, maize, and cassava. According to Yusuf and Bakare (2022, p. 105), domestic rice production increased by 70%, reducing dependence on imported rice and creating rural employment opportunities. However, issues of repayment default, political capture, and insecurity in farming communities constrained sustainability. Nonetheless, the programme demonstrated the state’s role in rural development within a democratic framework.

- **Transparency, Governance, and Civic Engagement**

A hallmark of democratic governance was the growing demand for transparency and accountability. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and the media were active in exposing corruption and monitoring elections. Legislative sessions were broadcast live, and budget data became increasingly available online. Omilusi (2021) asserts that the use of social media during #EndSARS protests and elections strengthened civic accountability. While repression existed, the democratic environment enabled citizens and NGOs to participate in governance more than in previous military regimes.



### **Negative Impacts of Democratic Governance on Socio-economic Development**

Between 2015 and 2024, democratic governance in Nigeria failed to deliver the anticipated socio-economic transformation, largely due to persistent macroeconomic mismanagement, an overreliance on oil revenues, weak institutional capacity, and poor policy implementation. Although democratic structures such as regular elections, legislative processes, and constitutional provisions remained intact, these did not translate into tangible improvements in the economic well-being of citizens. Instead, the period witnessed declining economic performance, worsening poverty, and growing inequality.

The Nigerian economy experienced two major recessions during this period. The first occurred in 2016 following a sharp decline in global oil prices, while the second took place in 2020, triggered by the economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank 2021). These recessions exposed the country's overdependence on crude oil exports and its vulnerability to external shocks. Despite subsequent recovery efforts, economic growth remained weak and insufficient to meet the demands of a growing population. Annual GDP growth averaged just 2.5%, which was below the population growth rate of 2.6%, resulting in a decline in per capita income and widespread economic hardship (IMF 2022).

Unemployment surged during this period, reaching a staggering 33.3% by the end of 2020, with youth unemployment even higher at over 42% (NBS 2021). This created a social crisis, as millions of young Nigerians, including university graduates, found themselves without viable employment opportunities. The informal sector absorbed much of this unemployed population, but this did little to reduce underemployment or job insecurity. Akinyemi and Adeniran (2021) observe that the failure of the Nigerian state to generate meaningful jobs undermined the credibility of democratic governance, as citizens increasingly questioned the value of electoral participation that yielded no economic dividends.

Inflationary pressures compounded the problem. Inflation remained in double digits for most of the period, with food inflation particularly troubling. In 2021, food inflation rose to over 23%, and by 2023, following the removal of fuel subsidies by the Tinubu administration, inflation skyrocketed across all sectors of the economy (BudgIT 2024). The subsidy removal in 2023 pushed petrol prices from ₦185 to over ₦600 per litre, causing dramatic increases in transportation costs, commodity prices, and household expenses. For instance, the price of a 50kg bag of rice, a staple food, rose from around ₦14,000 in 2015 to over ₦60,000 in 2024. Urban transportation costs quintupled, particularly in cities like Lagos and Abuja, making it difficult for ordinary Nigerians to afford basic necessities.

As economic conditions deteriorated, poverty deepened. In 2022, the National Bureau of Statistics reported that over 133 million Nigerians were living in multidimensional poverty, representing 63% of the population (NBS 2022). These individuals lacked access to health



care, quality education, clean water, adequate nutrition, and employment opportunities. Though the government attempted to address poverty through various social investment programmes, including N-Power, TraderMoni, and Conditional Cash Transfers, these initiatives were fraught with challenges. Reports revealed that the programmes suffered from poor targeting, funding inconsistencies, corruption, and politicisation of beneficiary selection (SERAP 2020). According to Omitola (2019), the politicisation of social welfare systems significantly limited their capacity to alleviate poverty, especially in rural and conflict-prone areas.

The education and health sectors, which are vital for long-term economic development, remained neglected. Nigerian universities were frequently shut down due to industrial disputes, with academic staff unions embarking on prolonged strikes. Between 2015 and 2023, universities were closed for a cumulative total of 15 months due to unresolved issues surrounding funding, salaries, and infrastructure (Adepoju 2022). At the primary and secondary levels, especially in rural northern Nigeria, many schools lacked qualified teachers and functional classrooms. These deficiencies reduced school enrolment and completion rates and worsened youth illiteracy and social exclusion.

Similarly, the healthcare system remained underfunded and inefficient. Public hospitals faced chronic shortages of medical supplies, poorly paid staff, and crumbling infrastructure. Despite the Abuja Declaration of 2001, which required African governments to allocate 15% of their annual budgets to health, Nigeria consistently failed to meet this target. Health expenditure remained low, and out-of-pocket payments accounted for over 70% of total health spending (WHO 2022). The consequence was an increase in preventable deaths and medical tourism among the elite. Moreover, the period witnessed a mass exodus of medical professionals, with more than 11,000 Nigerian doctors emigrating to countries such as the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and Canada between 2016 and 2023 in search of better working conditions (NMA 2023). Adebani (2021) argues that this neglect of human capital development is a grave indictment of Nigeria's democratic governance and a direct threat to national development.

The agricultural sector, which employs a significant portion of the population, especially in rural areas, also suffered neglect. While programmes like the Central Bank's Anchor Borrowers' Programme aimed to improve access to credit for smallholder farmers, implementation gaps and elite capture undermined their effectiveness. Security challenges such as banditry, farmer-herder clashes, and Boko Haram attacks made many farming communities unsafe, particularly in Benue, Plateau, and Kaduna States. Climate change-related events, such as the catastrophic floods of 2022, destroyed vast hectares of farmland in Kogi, Anambra, and Bayelsa States, worsening food insecurity and rural poverty (UNDP 2023).



Overall, the period was marked by growing regional disparities and socio-economic inequality. While southern states such as Lagos and Ogun made relative progress in infrastructure and private-sector development, many northern and Middle Belt states continued to experience severe poverty, educational backwardness, and poor service delivery. This uneven development bred feelings of marginalisation, intensified identity politics, and fueled separatist agitations in the Southeast and other disaffected regions.

In assessing this turbulent period, Olorunfemi and Adegbite (2023) conclude that democratic governance in Nigeria from 2015 to 2024 did not lead to meaningful economic development. Rather, it entrenched elite interests, institutionalised poor policy implementation, and exacerbated macroeconomic instability. As a result, citizens increasingly viewed democracy as a hollow promise that failed to improve their material conditions or expand their economic opportunities.

### **Challenges of Democratic Governance in Promoting Socio-Economic Development**

The challenges of democratic governance from effectively promoting socio-economic development in Nigeria are multifaceted, systemic, and deeply rooted in the country's political economy and historical trajectory. Democratic governance—ideally characterized by accountability, participation, transparency, and the rule of law—should provide the foundation for inclusive and sustainable development. However, in Nigeria, these ideals are often undermined by a complex interplay of structural and institutional weaknesses. The failure to translate democratic gains into tangible socio-economic progress is particularly evident in recurrent policy inconsistencies, endemic corruption, weak institutions, pervasive insecurity, infrastructure deficits, ethno-religious politicization, and poor leadership.

One of the most persistent problems is policy inconsistency, which has repeatedly disrupted long-term planning and economic stability. For instance, the naira redesign policy initiated under the Buhari administration in 2022 was poorly conceived and hastily implemented, leading to severe cash shortages that crippled small businesses, caused public unrest, and undermined trust in monetary authorities. Similarly, the sudden removal of fuel subsidies in 2023 under the Tinubu administration, though intended as a fiscal reform, sparked inflation, widened the poverty gap, and plunged millions into deeper economic distress. These abrupt policy shifts illustrate what Joseph Stiglitz (2002:78) describes as the “credibility problem” of governments that make decisions without adequate planning, consultation, or institutional preparedness, resulting in public disillusionment and economic instability.

Corruption is another formidable barrier to democratic development. It distorts public resource allocation, erodes institutional trust, and exacerbates inequality. Nigeria has consistently ranked low on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, with sectors such as petroleum, power, and public procurement being especially vulnerable.



Corruption manifests not only through outright embezzlement but also via inflated contracts, ghost workers, and diversion of social funds. As Paul Collier (2007:53) asserts, “corruption is the economic equivalent of a tax on innovation and productivity,” which disproportionately affects the poor and hampers private sector growth. The Nigerian government's anti-corruption institutions, including the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), often suffer from limited autonomy and are perceived as tools for political vendettas rather than instruments of justice.

The problem of weak institutions further compounds the challenge. Democratic governance relies on the separation of powers and strong oversight, yet in Nigeria, the judiciary and legislature are often subordinated to executive control. Courts are underfunded and subject to political pressures, limiting their capacity to dispense justice independently. Similarly, the legislature frequently functions as a rubber stamp for executive decisions, undermining its role in policy scrutiny and budget oversight. According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), nations fail when institutions become extractive rather than inclusive serving elite interests instead of the broader public. Nigeria's institutional frailty manifests in ineffective regulatory enforcement, weak public administration, and the frequent failure of development plans.

Insecurity has also become a defining impediment to democratic consolidation and economic development. The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, banditry and herder-farmer conflicts in the northwest and central regions and kidnapping-for-ransom across the country have created a climate of fear, displacement, and economic stagnation. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2023), Nigeria remains one of the most terrorism-affected countries in the world. The human and financial costs are enormous: schools have been shut down in conflict zones, agricultural output has declined, and foreign direct investment (FDI) has dwindled due to security concerns. As argued by Collier et al. (2003:57), “conflict traps” undermine governance by shifting resources from productive uses to security spending, deepening poverty, and delegitimizing the state.

Another significant challenge is Nigeria's chronic infrastructure deficit, which hampers productivity and undermines citizens' quality of life. Despite decades of oil wealth, the country still struggles with erratic electricity supply, poor road networks, and inadequate healthcare facilities. The World Bank (2020) estimates that Nigeria needs to invest over \$100 billion annually for the next decade to bridge its infrastructure gap, yet actual public capital expenditure remains significantly below this threshold. Power outages, for instance, force businesses to rely on expensive generators, while poor transport infrastructure increases logistics costs, making Nigerian goods uncompetitive. These infrastructural weaknesses diminish the developmental impact of democratic governance by limiting economic opportunity and access to essential services.



Closely tied to the above is the pervasive issue of ethno-religious politics, which undermines national unity and policy coherence. The patronage-based political system incentivizes the distribution of public goods along ethnic and religious lines rather than based on merit or developmental need. Government appointments, resource allocations, and political alliances are often guided by sectional interests, breeding resentment and exclusion. This aligns with Ekeh's (1975:106) theory of the "two publics," in which loyalty to ethnic identity overrides commitment to the national public sphere, thereby weakening democratic accountability and cohesion. The politicization of identity exacerbates regional disparities, fuels social unrest, and dilutes the transformative potential of governance.

Lastly, the crisis of leadership remains a root cause of Nigeria's developmental stagnation. Many of the country's elected leaders have prioritized personal or party interests over the common good. Visionary leadership, which is essential for driving reform and mobilizing national consensus, has been largely absent. Instead, governance is often characterized by short-termism, populism, and rent-seeking behavior. As Chinua Achebe (1983:1) famously argued, "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership." This leadership deficit translates into weak policy implementation, poor crisis management, and an inability to inspire collective action for development. Without competent, ethical, and responsive leadership, democratic governance cannot fulfill its promise of socio-economic transformation.

From the foregoing, democratic governance in Nigeria is constrained by deep-rooted structural and institutional challenges that limit its capacity to foster inclusive development. These challenges include policy inconsistency, corruption, weak institutions, insecurity, infrastructure deficits, identity politics, and leadership failures which form a mutually reinforcing web of dysfunction.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

The socio-economic indicators of Nigeria from 2015 to 2024 reveals that Nigeria's democratic governance has not been fully successful in promoting socio-economic development. The country has faced multiple challenges, including worsening poverty and unemployment rates, inflation, high living costs, and persistent corruption. Despite some efforts to address these issues, such as anti-corruption campaigns and fiscal reforms, Nigeria's socio-economic problems remain entrenched, requiring more comprehensive and sustained policy interventions..

The data suggests that the key obstacles to Nigeria's socio-economic development include poor economic policies, political instability, poor leadership, institutional weakness, policy



inconsistency, insecurity, and systemic corruption. These factors have undermined the country's potential to translate its democratic framework into tangible socio-economic improvements for its population.

### **Recommendations**

1. **Economic Diversification:** Nigeria must shift away from its overreliance on the oil sector and invest in other sectors, such as agriculture, technology, solid minerals, and manufacturing, to create more jobs and stimulate sustainable economic growth.
2. **Job Creation and Youth Empowerment:** Policies that promote job creation, particularly for the youth, are essential. This could include expanding vocational training programs, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and fostering innovation through entrepreneurship.
3. **Tackling Inflation and Cost of Living:** The government should implement measures to control inflation and reduce the cost of living. This may involve stabilizing the currency, regulating fuel prices, and addressing supply chain issues that led to price increases.
4. **Anti-Corruption Reforms:** Strengthening the institutional framework for fighting corruption is critical. The government should enhance the independence of anti-corruption bodies like the EFCC and ensure that corruption cases are prosecuted effectively, with a focus on transparency and accountability.
5. **Inclusive Policy Framework:** Policymakers should ensure that the benefits of democratic governance are more evenly distributed. This includes ensuring that economic reforms focus on reducing inequality and providing greater access to quality education, healthcare, and housing for marginalized populations.
6. **Improved Security:** Deploying technology (e.g., drones, surveillance), increasing community policing, and enhancing military capability will help stabilize the country. Also, addressing root causes like youth unemployment and poverty can reduce crime.
7. **Stable and Clear Economic Policies and Currency Stabilization Measures:** Fiscal discipline, transparency in policy formulation, and consultations with stakeholders are essential. Improving export earnings, cutting import dependence, and attracting diaspora remittances will strengthen the naira. Restoring confidence in the forex market through transparent operations is critical.

### **Competing Interest**

The authors declare that no conflicting interest exist in this study.



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