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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BALANCING NIGERIA'S SECURITY, ECONOMIC, AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRIORITIES: TAKING ACTION

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria faces a complex governance dilemma in balancing national security imperatives, economic growth ambitions, and environmental sustainability. Persistent insecurity - including insurgency, kidnapping for ransom and banditry in the North-East, armed robbery and oil-related militancy in the Oil Rivers Region (Niger Delta States), farmer–herder conflicts in the Central Region of Nigeria, and agitation for independence status and unknown gun men palaver in the South East - continues to strain state capacity and divert public resources. Meanwhile, Nigeria's heavy dependence on export of petroleum products constrains economic diversification and exacerbates environmental degradation, particularly in ecologically fragile regions. Climate change further intensifies vulnerabilities through desertification, flooding, food insecurity, and displacement of the population. This paper posits that sustainable development in Nigeria requires a strategic recalibration of national priorities that integrates security, economic, and environmental policies rather than treating them as competing domains. Drawing on the human security and sustainable development frameworks, the paper adopts a qualitative policy-analytical approach to examine the structural interconnections among insecurity, economic fragility, and environmental decline. The paper contends that environmental mismanagement fuels economic instability and violent conflict, while poor economic planning undermines environmental protection and social stability. The study proposes actionable reforms, including security sector restructuring, green economic diversification, climate-responsive governance, and institutional coordination mechanisms. Ultimately, achieving sustainable development in Nigeria demands moving from reactive crisis management to proactive, integrated policy action anchored in long-term national resilience. The paper concludes that balancing these priorities is not merely a developmental choice but a strategic necessity for Nigeria's stability and global relevance in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: National security, environmental sustainability, insecurity, insurgency, rentier state

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's pursuit of sustainable development is increasingly constrained by the complex interaction between insecurity, economic fragility, and environmental degradation. As one of Africa's country with a very large population as well as being one of the continent's largest economies, Nigeria's development trajectory has regional and global implications (World Bank, 2023). Yet, persistent insurgency in the North-East, gangsterism and brigandage in the North-West, farmers versus herdsmen conflicts in the Middle Belt, militancy in the Niger Delta, and fights and struggles independence country in the South-East, have eroded national cohesion and undermined economic productivity (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Empirical studies demonstrate that violent conflict significantly disrupts agricultural production, displaces populations, and deters both domestic and foreign investment (Collier, 2007; Stewart, 2008). Simultaneously, Nigeria's structural dependence on oil revenue exposes the state to global commodity volatility and reinforces institutional weaknesses typical of rentier states (Karl, 1997; Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2013). Environmental degradation — particularly oil pollution in the Niger Delta region and desertification in the Northern part of Nigeria — further undermines livelihoods and fuels communal tensions (Watts, 2004; Homer-Dixon, 1999).

Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, intensifying food insecurity, migration pressures, and socio-economic instability (Ide, 2018; Busby, 2021). The catastrophic flooding of 2022, which displaced over one million people, illustrates the scale of Nigeria's environmental vulnerability (National Emergency Management Agency [NEMA], 2023).

Despite the evident interconnections among these challenges, Nigerian governance structures often treat security, economic planning, and environmental management as separate policy domains. This paper contends that sustainable development in Nigeria requires an integrated framework grounded in human security, political economy reform, and sustainability principles (United Nations, 2015; United Nations Development Programme, 1994).

2.0. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORITICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1. Conceptual Clarifications

Security

Security in contemporary scholarship extends beyond state-centric military defense to encompass the broader concept of human security. The 1994 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme redefined security as protection from severe threats, for example: hunger, disease, repression, and environmental degradation (UNDP, 1994). This reconceptualization emphasizes freedom from want and fear as core pillars of national stability. In fragile states such as Nigeria, insecurity is deeply intertwined with economic deprivation and environmental stress (Stewart, 2008). Thus, national security must incorporate socio-economic resilience and ecological sustainability.

Growth of the economy and Transformation of its Structures

Economic growth makes reference to sustained increases in actual output and productivity. However, scholars distinguish between growth and structural transformation. While growth may occur through resource extraction, sustainable development requires diversification, industrialization, and inclusive employment generation (Collier, 2007; Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2013). Nigeria's oil-dependent growth model reflects the characteristics of rentier political economy, where external rents weaken institutional accountability and long-term planning (Karl, 1997). Consequently, economic expansion without diversification increases vulnerability to external shocks.

Sustainability of the Environment

Sustainability of the environment has to do with responsible management of a nation's natural resources (a country's gifts from mother nature) to ensure intergenerational equity. According to Homer-Dixon (1999), environmental scarcity — whether caused by degradation, population growth, or unequal distribution — can generate social instability and violent conflict. Climate change further compounds these risks, especially in agrarian economies (Ide, 2018). In Nigeria, desertification, oil pollution, flooding, and deforestation represent significant environmental stressors that threaten food security and human livelihoods (Watts, 2004; Busby, 2021).

Sustainable Development

The most frequently quoted definition of sustainable development is the "World Commission on Environment and Development Report" (Our Common Future) version. According to the Report, "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN Documents,1987). Sustainable development integrates growth of the economy growth, social inclusiveness, and protection of the environment. The UN 2030 Agenda emphasizes policy coherence across these domains (United Nations, 2015). Goals 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 13 (Climate Action), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) underscore the interconnected nature of security, economic transformation, and environmental sustainability. Thus, sustainable development is not sectoral but systemic, requiring coordinated governance mechanisms.

Rentier Economy

A rentier economy is a country that gets a large chunk of its national revenue from renting its natural resources to external patronizers, rather than from taxing its own citizens. The term is most commonly used for countries that rely heavily on oil and gas exports. The word *rentier* comes from "rent," meaning income earned without producing goods or services, such as; Oil exports, Natural gas exports, Mineral rights, Canal or transit fees. Instead of generating wealth through diversified industries, the state earns money by selling access to natural resources.

South East

In the Nigerian context, South East refers to one of the country's six geopolitical zones. It is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group and is culturally, politically, and historically significant in Nigeria. The South East consists of five states: Abia State**,** Anambra State**,** Ebonyi State**,** Enugu State and Imo State. The major urban and commercial centres include: Onitsha**,** Aba**,** Enugu and Owerri

Niger Delta

The name Niger Delta in Nigeria refers to the oil-rich coastal region in Southern Nigeria where the River Niger empties into the Atlantic Ocean. It is one of the most important economic regions in the country because it produces the majority of Nigeria's crude oil and natural gas. The Niger Delta lies in the southern part of Nigeria within the Gulf of Guinea. It is formed by the delta of the Niger River. This river spreads into many creeks, swamps, and mangrove forests before reaching the Atlantic Ocean. According to the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the Niger Delta has nine states: Akwa Ibom State, Bayelsa State, Cross River State, Delta State, Edo State, Imo State, Abia State, Ondo State and Rivers State. The region includes major oil cities such as: Port Harcourt, Warri, Eket and Ibeno

The Niger Delta is the centre of Nigeria's petroleum industry. It hosts many oil fields operated by multinational oil companies like: Shell, Chevron and ExxonMobil. About 80–90% of Nigeria's export earnings have historically come from oil produced in this region.The Niger Delta is ethnically diverse. Major groups include: Ijaw, Ogoni, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ibibio, Efik, and Isoko. These communities traditionally depend on fishing, farming, and riverine trade. Despite producing most of Nigeria's wealth, the region has faced serious challenges:

1. Environmental Pollution: Oil spillage and gas flaring have damaged farming lands and rivers.
2. Underdevelopment: Many communities lack good roads, schools, hospitals, and electricity.
3. Militancy and Conflict: Some groups protested against oil companies and the federal government.

This led to militancy in the 2000s involving groups like: Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). To address development problems, the Nigerian government created institutions such as: Niger Delta Development Commission (2000) and Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs (2008). These agencies are meant to promote development in the region. In simple terms, the Niger Delta is the oil-producing region of southern Nigeria, consisting of nine states and forming the backbone of the country's petroleum economy, but it has also faced environmental damage and political agitation over resource control.

Middle Belt

The Middle Belt refers to the central region of Nigeria that lies between the predominantly Muslim North and the largely Christian South. It is known for its great ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. Unlike the six geopolitical zones, the Middle Belt is not an official administrative zone; rather, it is a political, cultural, and historical term used to describe a group of states and ethnic minorities in central Nigeria.The Middle Belt usually includes parts or all of the following states: Benue State, Plateau State, Nasarawa State, Kogi State, Niger State, Kwara State, Taraba State, Adamawa State, Southern Kaduna (often included culturally). Major cities in the region include: Jos, Makurdi and Lokoja

The Middle Belt is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in Nigeria, with hundreds of ethnic groups, including: Tiv, Idoma, Berom ,Jukun ,Nupe ,Gbagyi ,Igala and EggonThese groups are generally referred to as "minority ethnic groups" of Northern Nigeria. **I**n simple terms, **t**he Middle Belt **is the** central region of Nigeria inhabited mainly by minority ethnic groups**,** located between the northern and southern parts of the country, and historically associated with struggles for minority political recognition and cultural identity.

North East

In the Nigerian context, the North East refers to one of the six official geopolitical zones of Nigeria, located in the north-eastern part of Nigeria. It is known for its large landmass, agricultural activities, and in recent years, security challenges linked to insurgency. The North East consists of six states: Adamawa State, Bauchi State, Borno State, Gombe State, Taraba State, and Yobe State. Major cities in the zone include: Maiduguri, Yola, Bauchi, and Gombe. The region contains many ethnic groups, including: Kanuri, Fulani, Babur, Marghi, Bachama, Jukun and Tangale. The Kanuri people are historically influential because the region was once the centre of the powerful Kanem-Bornu Empire.

In recent years, the North East has been associated with the insurgency of the extremist group: Boko Haram. The insurgency began around 2009, mainly in Maiduguri. The conflict has caused the displacement of millions of people, destruction of towns and infrastructure, and humanitarian crises in the region. Another faction linked to the conflict is Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

North West

The North West is one of the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. It is found in the North-Western geographical location of Nigeria and is one of the most populous regions in Nigeria. The zone is mostly inhabited by the Hausa and Fulani people and has historically been a major political and cultural centre of Northern region and indeed, the whole of Nigeria. The North West consists of seven states: Jigawa State, Kaduna State, Kano State, Katsina State, Kebbi State, Sokoto State and Zamfara State. Important cities in the region include: Kano, Kaduna and Sokoto. The North West was historically part of the Hausa city-states, which were powerful trading kingdoms before colonial rule. In the early 19th century, the region came under the influence of the Islamic reform movement led by Usman dan Fodio.

This movement engendered the collapse of the Hausa city-states and the formation and/or creation of Islamic states within the Sokoto Caliphate. The Sokoto Caliphate turned to become one of the largest and most influential Islamic states in Africa. The dominant ethnic groups include: Hausa, Fulani. Other minority groups exist, especially in southern parts of states like Kaduna. Religion in the region is predominantly Islam, though there are also Christian communities. In recent years, the North West has faced serious security challenges, especially armed banditry, kidnapping, and rural violence, particularly in Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna States. These problems have affected farming, rural communities, and regional stability.

Scholarly discourse increasingly recognizes the nexus between security, economic governance, and environmental sustainability in fragile and developing states. Research on conflict and development demonstrates that violence undermines economic productivity, weakens institutions, and perpetuates poverty traps (Collier, 2007; Stewart, 2008). In Nigeria, insurgency and communal conflicts have disrupted agricultural value chains and displaced millions, contributing to food insecurity and inflationary pressures (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Environmental security literature establishes that resource scarcity and ecological degradation can intensify rivalry as well as and violent conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1999). In the Nigerian context, desertification in the northern regions reduces arable land and grazing resources, exacerbating farmer–

herder tensions (Ide, 2018). Climate change is widely described as a "threat multiplier," particularly in fragile states where institutional capacity is limited (Busby, 2021).

The political economy of resource dependence further explains structural governance weaknesses. Rentier state theory argues that economies reliant on extractive rents often experience weak institutional accountability and limited diversification (Karl, 1997). Nigeria's dependence on oil exports illustrates this pattern, as hydrocarbon revenues have historically reduced incentives for taxation reform and comprehensive economic growth and advancement (Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2013). Environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, including oil spills and gas flaring, has deepened grievances and militancy (Watts, 2004). Although these bodies of literature address security, economy, and environment separately, fewer studies integrate them into a unified governance framework aligned with sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2015). This paper addresses that gap by synthesizing these strands.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Human Security Theory, Resource Curse Theory, and the Sustainable Development paradigm to explain Nigeria's structural development dilemma.

Human Security Theory

Human Security Theory, advanced by the United Nations Development Programme (1994), reconceptualizes security beyond military defense to include economic security, food security, environmental security, and political stability. The theory argues that national stability depends on protecting individuals from chronic threats such as poverty, disease, and ecological degradation (UNDP, 1994). In Nigeria, youth unemployment, food insecurity, and climate-induced displacement generate vulnerability that facilitates recruitment into insurgent and criminal networks (Stewart, 2008). Thus, human security provides both explanatory and normative grounding for integrated policy reform.

Resource Curse and Rentier State Theory

Resource Curse theory posits that resource-rich countries frequently experience slower long-term growth, institutional decay, and conflict due to overreliance on extractive revenues (Karl, 1997). Nigeria's oil-dependent economy reflects classic rentier dynamics: fiscal centralization, weak taxation systems, and limited diversification (Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2013). Oil extraction has also generated environmental externalities that undermine livelihoods and foster grievances (Watts, 2004). Therefore, resource dependence links economic structure to environmental degradation and insecurity.

Sustainable Development Paradigm

The Sustainable Development Goals framework, adopted by the United Nations (2015), emphasizes policy coherence across economic growth (Goal 8), climate action (Goal 13), and peace and justice (Goal 16). Sustainable development scholarship underscores that these pillars are interdependent rather than sequential (United Nations, 2015). Together, these frameworks justify a holistic governance model in which security reform, economic diversification, and environmental protection are pursued simultaneously.

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3.0. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative explanatory design grounded in interpretive policy analysis. Qualitative methodology is appropriate where research seeks to understand structural interrelationships and governance dynamics rather than test isolated quantitative hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data sources included, Policy documents from Nigerian federal institutions, Reports from the World Bank (2023) ,Reports from the International Monetary Fund (2023), Peer-reviewed academic literature (2015–2026), Conflict and environmental assessment reports. Policy analysis enabled examination of institutional fragmentation and cross-sectoral gaps. Comparative inference situated Nigeria within broader West African governance patterns.

4.0. CONTENT ANALYSES AND DISCUSSION

Security–Economy Feedback Loop

Empirical studies have confirmed that violent conflict significantly reduces GDP growth, agricultural productivity, and investment inflows (Collier, 2007). In Nigeria, insurgency and banditry have displaced farming populations, increasing food insecurity and inflation (International Crisis Group, 2022). Defense expenditures have risen in response to insecurity, potentially crowding out capital investment in infrastructure and social services. Youth unemployment further exacerbates instability. Stewart (2008) argues that horizontal inequalities (economic disparities between groups) can intensify grievances and violence. Nigeria's regional disparities reflect this pattern.

Economic Dependence and Environmental Externalities

Oil dependence generates macroeconomic volatility. Price fluctuations directly affect public revenue, constraining development planning (Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2013). Simultaneously, oil extraction produces environmental deterioration, particularly in the Niger Delta (Watts, 2004). Weak regulatory enforcement and corruption reduce accountability in environmental governance (Karl, 1997). Consequently, economic dependence and ecological degradation reinforce one another.

Climate Change as a Risk Increment

Climate change intensifies dearth of natural resources and societal tension (Homer-Dixon, 1999; Ide, 2018). Desertification in northern Nigeria reduces grazing land, contributing to pastoral migration and farmer–herder conflict. Flooding incidents, such as the 2022 disaster, demonstrate increasing climate volatility and infrastructural vulnerability. Busby (2021) argues that climate shocks are most destabilizing where institutional resilience is weak. Nigeria's governance challenges amplify climate-security risks.

Institutional Fragmentation

Fragmented governance undermines policy coherence. The Sustainable Development framework emphasizes cross-sector coordination (United Nations, 2015), yet Nigerian ministries often operate independently, limiting integrated planning. Without structural reform, policies addressing security, economic growth, and environmental protection remain reactive and uncoordinated.

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDAATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that it is impossible to addressed Nigeria's developmental problems through isolated policy approaches. Security instability, economic fragility, and environmental degradation are deeply interconnected structural problems that mutually reinforce one another. Persistent insecurity disrupts economic production, displaces populations, and diverts public resources toward defense spending. At the same time, Nigeria's overreliance on oil revenue has reduced the country's ability for economic heterogeneity while at same time encouraging environmental destruction, particularly in the oil producing region of the country. Environmental stress manifested through desertification, flooding, deforestation, and resource scarcity — further intensifies livelihood pressures and communal conflicts.

The study showed that global warming, or global heating or climate emergency acts as a powerful risk increment in Nigeria's fragile governance context. Environmental shocks exacerbate food insecurity, stimulate migration, and deepen rivalry for limited resources which has the potentiality for unhealthy fight/conflict. These dynamics illustrate the strong need for human persons' safety and protection framework, which emphasizes the protection of individuals and communities from economic, environmental, and political vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, the paper highlighted how institutional fragmentation within Nigeria's governance system undermines policy coherence. Security management, economic planning, and environmental regulation are frequently handled by separate bureaucratic structures with limited coordination. This fragmentation prevents the emergence of a comprehensive national strategy capable of addressing the structural roots of insecurity and underdevelopment.

Achieving sustainable development in Nigeria, therefore, requires a fundamental shift from reactive crisis management toward proactive, integrated governance. Security reform, economic diversification, and environmental sustainability must be pursued simultaneously within a coherent national development framework. In this context, balancing security, economic, and environmental priorities is not merely a policy option but a strategic necessity for ensuring Nigeria's long-term stability, prosperity, and international relevance in the twenty-first century.

5.2. Recommendations

In view of this analysis, the following policy measures are recommended:

1. Security Sector Reform and Community-Based Security

Nigeria should strengthen its security architecture through institutional reforms that improve accountability, intelligence coordination, and community engagement. Community policing initiatives and locally grounded conflict-resolution mechanisms can enhance trust between security institutions and citizens, thereby improving early-warning responses to emerging security threats.

2. Economic Diversification and Industrial Development

Reducing dependence on oil revenue is essential for long-term economic resilience. The government should promote diversification through investment in agriculture, manufacturing, technology, and renewable energy sectors. Policies that support small and medium enterprises (SMEs), agroprocessing industries, and digital innovation can generate employment and broaden the country's economic base.

3. Green Economic Transition

Nigeria should integrate environmental sustainability into its economic development strategy by promoting green technologies, renewable energy development, and climate-smart agriculture. Investment in solar energy, sustainable land management, and ecological restoration can simultaneously create jobs while mitigating environmental degradation. Government institutions must strengthen climate adaptation policies, particularly in vulnerable regions. Flood control infrastructure, early warning systems, drought management programmes, and sustainable water resource management are critical for reducing climate-related vulnerabilities. Stronger enforcement of environmental regulations is necessary to address pollution and ecological damage, especially in the Niger Delta. Regulatory agencies must be empowered to make sure that oil extractive companies respect known environmental standards and provide compensation and remediation for affected communities.

4. Institutional Coordination for Sustainable Development

Nigeria should establish an integrated national policy framework that coordinates security, economic, and environmental policies across ministries and agencies. Strengthening inter-ministerial collaboration and aligning national planning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can improve governance effectiveness.

Conflict of Interest

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

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