

Nigeria's Development Conundrum: The Interplay Between Corruption, Economy, and Social Welfare (A Politico-Economy Analysis)

Nathan Udoinyang^{1*}, Nsikan Udoinyang² & Dickson Okwudiri Alimezie³

Department of Economics, Iconic University, Nigeria¹

University of Education Afaha Nsit, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria²

Department of Economics, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port

Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria³

*Corresponding author, e-mail: u.nathan@iconicuniversity.edu.ng

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2457-30451>

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria continues to experience severe developmental challenges despite its abundant natural and human resources, largely due to the persistent problem of corruption. This study examined the relationship between corruption, economic development, and social welfare within Nigeria's political economy framework. The study specifically investigated how corruption affects economic growth, social welfare, and governance structures in Nigeria. A mixed-method research design was adopted using secondary macroeconomic data from the World Bank, IMF, and National Bureau of Statistics, alongside primary data collected through 400 questionnaires distributed across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, of which 307 were returned and analysed. Descriptive statistics, correlation, regression analysis, and thematic analysis were employed. Findings revealed that corruption significantly reduces economic productivity, discourages investment, weakens institutional performance, and limits access to essential social services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. The study further revealed that institutional failure, rent-seeking behaviour, and weak accountability mechanisms contribute to governance breakdown and declining public trust. The study concludes that corruption remains a major barrier to sustainable development and social welfare improvement in Nigeria. The paper recommends stronger institutional accountability, transparency reforms, and increased investment in public service

delivery to strengthen governance and national development.

ABSTRAK

Nigeria terus menghadapi tantangan pembangunan yang serius meskipun memiliki sumber daya alam dan manusia yang melimpah, terutama akibat masalah korupsi yang terus berlangsung. Penelitian ini mengkaji hubungan antara korupsi, pembangunan ekonomi, dan kesejahteraan sosial dalam kerangka ekonomi politik Nigeria. Penelitian ini secara khusus menganalisis bagaimana korupsi memengaruhi pertumbuhan ekonomi, kesejahteraan sosial, dan struktur tata kelola pemerintahan di Nigeria. Penelitian menggunakan desain mixed-method dengan data sekunder dari World Bank, IMF, dan National Bureau of Statistics serta data primer dari 400 kuesioner yang disebar di enam zona geopolitik Nigeria, dengan 307 kuesioner berhasil dianalisis. Analisis data menggunakan statistik deskriptif, korelasi, regresi, dan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa korupsi secara signifikan menurunkan produktivitas ekonomi, menghambat investasi, melemahkan kinerja institusi, serta membatasi akses terhadap layanan sosial penting seperti pendidikan, kesehatan, dan infrastruktur. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa korupsi merupakan hambatan utama bagi pembangunan berkelanjutan dan peningkatan kesejahteraan sosial di Nigeria. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan penguatan akuntabilitas institusi, reformasi transparansi, dan peningkatan investasi publik.



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INTRODUCTION

Corruption remains one of the greatest obstacles to economic development and social welfare improvement in Nigeria. Despite the country's abundant natural and human resources, persistent corruption has weakened governance institutions, reduced economic productivity, increased poverty, and contributed to infrastructural collapse. Reports from the World Bank (2024), IMF (2025), and Transparency International (2025) consistently identify corruption as a major factor responsible for Nigeria's developmental stagnation and governance inefficiency. Corruption distorts public resource allocation, discourages foreign and domestic investment, weakens institutional credibility, and limits access to essential public services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure.

Within the political economy perspective, corruption is not merely an administrative failure but a structural governance problem linked to institutional weakness and elite capture. Rent-Seeking Theory explains how political actors manipulate public resources for private gain, thereby reducing productive investment and economic efficiency (Tullock et al., 2019). Social Contract Theory further explains that when governments fail to provide public goods and social welfare, public trust and state legitimacy decline (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020). Similarly, Principal-Agent Theory argues that weak accountability systems create opportunities for public officials to pursue personal interests at the expense of citizens (Bergman & Lane, 2021).

Previous studies have examined corruption from economic, institutional, or governance perspectives. For example, Adekunle (2022) focused on corruption and economic stagnation, while Ogbuagu (2023) examined corruption and social inequality in Nigeria. Ite (2024) analysed corruption in Nigeria's oil sector from a political economy perspective. However, limited studies have integrated corruption, economic development, and social welfare within a unified political economy framework using both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Existing studies also pay little attention to how corruption simultaneously affects institutional performance, economic growth, and citizens' welfare outcomes across different regions of Nigeria.

Recent studies published in *Jurnal Ecogen* have also emphasized the importance of institutional quality, governance reforms, and public accountability in achieving sustainable economic development. For instance, Fajar and Azhar (2019) found that corruption perception and human development significantly influence economic growth in Southeast Asian countries, emphasizing the need for stronger bureaucratic and legal institutions. Similarly, Jauhari and Choiri (2024) reported that governance quality positively affects human development outcomes in ASEAN countries. These studies reinforce the argument that weak governance and corruption undermine economic progress and social welfare in developing economies.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a mixed-method political economy approach to examine the interaction between corruption, economic development, and social welfare in Nigeria. The study contributes to existing literature by integrating Rent-Seeking Theory, Social Contract Theory, and Principal-Agent Theory into a single analytical framework for understanding corruption and governance failure in Nigeria. The study specifically examines the effects of corruption on economic growth, evaluates its impact on social welfare, and analyses the relationship between corruption and governance structures within Nigeria's political economy. The findings are expected to contribute to anti-corruption policy reforms, institutional strengthening, and sustainable socio-economic development in Nigeria. This study is anchored on three theories namely: rent-seeking theory, social contract theory, and principal-agent theory.

The rent-seeking theory explains the behaviour of individuals and groups when they avoid the legal and productive utilization of public resources (Tullock, Seldon & Brady, 2019). In Nigeria, instances of public procurement, oil revenue allocation, and regulatory capture lead to rent-seeking which in turn produces capital flight, suboptimal investment, and an economy that is less productive (Svensson, 2020; Adekunle, 2022). Such activities drain public resources, misguide investment, and increase the economy's

inefficiency, especially on the dependent variables of foreign investment, public gross output, and productivity.

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau are the founders of Social Contract Theory, and Acemoglu & Robinson (2020) state that modern adaptations of these authors' works relate to the analysis of the governance of the state. Acemoglu & Robinson (2020) indicate that the state is legitimate and can hold its citizens to a social contract as long as the state is able to provide welfare and public goods. Thus, in Social Contract Theory, the state is able to provide its citizens protection and welfare, as well as, the distribution of resources to the citizens in a fair manner. Nigeria presents a social contract that has collapsed as public officials corruptly enrich themselves with resources that are meant for the health, education, and infrastructure of the poorer citizens, as well as, the poverty alleviation programs. This theory explains the growing and evident dissatisfaction, the low level of service provision, and the increasing deficit of the welfare of the citizens, as evident in the social service deprivation metric and the citizens' dissatisfaction with the provision of services and the equity of the services that are provided.

Considering corruption as the engagement of agents (public officials) in self-serving pursuits at the expense of the principals (the citizens), Principal-Agent Theory (Bergman & Lane, 2021; OECD, 2023) argues that in the absence of strong mechanisms of control, oversight, transparency, and accountability, Nigerian public officials have the opportunity to commit acts of corruption by misappropriating public funds. This study attempts to proxy agency failure by operationalising the absence of transparency, lack of accountability, and systemic inefficiencies.

The influence of corruption on the development of Nigeria has been addressed in previous studies, although many have been limited in breadth and methodological approaches. An ideological outlook has been taken by Ite (2024) studying the political economy of corruption in the oil sector in Nigeria and exposing the link in the struggle for dominance and the malignancy of corruption, inequality, and paralysis of policy. Ogbuagu (2023) in the same manner, but through critical discourse analysis, describes the increasing inequality and the erosion of the entitlements and the trans allocation of the public basic resources and services that are also, often, encumbered by corruption. Whereas Adekunle (2022) employs an econometric technique to demonstrate the corruption-induced economic stagnation and disinvestment for the years of 1990-2020, Okonjo-Iweala (2021) also employs the same to explain that the corruption-induced stagnation of economic growth and human resources was for the years of 1960-2015. The absence of the governing actors, Acemoglu and Robinson (2020) explain, also stands to be the original cause for the corruption as well as the socio-uneasiness. The present study intends to analyse the corruption and the economic and social welfare in Nigeria, also within the political economy framework. This shall be without doubt, of a mixed type, in the combination of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, which shall suffice to the phenomena in question. The study seeks to explain the manner in which corruption thwarts development at both national and sub-national levels.

The investigation will examine the correlation among theoretical and public policies of corruption and economic growth and the provision of social public goods. The final

submission will attempt to demonstrate the negative implications of such underdevelopment on the particular territory's governance and institutional frameworks. The suggested solution will tackle the enigma associated with the corruption phenomenon that theorizes that such development will equally be conditioned upon the presence of social inequity and injustice, unregulated governance, and the development of corrupt activities. This research aims to address the identified gaps by undertaking a multifaceted, mixed-method approach to political-economy analysis of multiple jurisdictions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-method research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative aspect examined the statistical relationship between corruption, economic development, and social welfare, while the qualitative aspect explored institutional failures, governance challenges, and citizens' perceptions of corruption within Nigeria's political economy. The study was conducted across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones: North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-South, and South-West. Selected states included Benue, Abuja, Taraba, Gombe, Kaduna, Kano, Imo, Abia, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Lagos, and Ondo States. The study focused on public institutions, markets, and civil society organisations within these regions.

The estimated population of Nigeria was approximately 230.7 million people according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024). Using the Taro Yamane sampling formula, a sample size of 400 respondents was selected. Out of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 307 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of 76.8%. A multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted. First, Nigeria's six geopolitical zones were identified. Second, two states were randomly selected from each geopolitical zone. Third, respondents were selected systematically from public institutions and market areas. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select 12 experts from civil society organisations, higher institutions, and public administration for qualitative interviews.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and interview guides. The questionnaire adopted a 5-point Likert scale to measure corruption perception, investment climate, public resource allocation, and social welfare indicators. Face and content validity were established through expert review by specialists in economics and political science. A pilot study was conducted to test the reliability of the instrument. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.80 indicated that the instrument was reliable for the study. The study ensured informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation of respondents. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and all responses were treated anonymously for academic purposes only. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. Qualitative interview responses were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring governance and corruption-related themes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Geopolitical, State Distribution of Questionnaires and Respondent Characteristics

The data presentation aimed to fulfil the objectives of the research. The research was a mixed methods design and the questionnaires were purposely distributed to ensure each region and each state had respondents, the study identified the respondents by socio-demographic

information including age, sex, marital status, and other characteristics were analysed and presented using frequency distribution.

Table 1: Geopolitical and State Distribution of Questionnaires

Region	No. of States in Geopolitical Zone	States Selected	Questionnaires Distributed	Questionnaires Returned
North Central	7	Benue, Abuja	33, 37	26, 28
North East	6	Taraba, Gombe	33, 33	22, 24
North West	7	Kaduna, Kano	33, 33	26, 23
South East	5	Imo, Abia	33, 33	25, 26
South South	6	Rivers, Akwa Ibom	33, 33	28, 30
South West	6	Lagos, Ondo	33, 33	26, 23
Total			400	307

Source: Author's Compilation (2026)

Table 2: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Socio-Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	175	57.0
Female	132	43.0
Total	307	100
Marital Status		
Single	114	37.1
Married	193	62.9
Total	307	100
Age Range		
20–40 years	98	31.9
41–60 years	118	38.4
61 yrs and Above	91	29.6
Total	307	100
Highest Educational Qualification		
FSLC/WAEC	60	19.5
NCE/ND	83	27.0
HND/B.Sc	103	33.6
M.Sc/Ph.D	61	19.9
Total	307	100

Source: Author's Survey (2026)

The data of the 2025 Author's Compilation in table 1 and 2 demonstrate the distribution of questionnaires on a geopolitical and state basis. Of the 400 distributed questionnaires, 307 were collected demonstrating an appropriate response rate, particularly given the allocation of 25 questionnaires in each of the 12 selected states. The response rates indicate an overwhelming married status of the participants, with 62.9% (n = 193) married, and 37.1% (n = 114) reported as single. The 2025 survey, which the researcher conducted, included socio-demographic characteristics consisting of the participants' sex, marital status, age, and educational attainment. The majority of respondents were married men aged 41-60 years, and respondents holding a Bachelor's degree constituted most of the population. Moreover, the respondents' representation from the included states was statistically balanced. In terms of the entire sample, a higher number of men was recorded, with 175 (57%), compared to 132 (43%) females. The great bulk of the respondents were within the age bracket of 41-60 years (38.4%). Furthermore, a majority (33.6%) of the respondents were HND/BSc holders, and those with FSLC/WAEC, which constituted the least academic qualifications, were 19.5%.

Descriptive Analysis Results

The findings are presented according to the research objectives of the study. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically.

Table 3: The Respondents' Perceptions of the Effects of Corruption on Economic Development and Social Welfare in Nigeria

S/N	Factors	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
Impact of Corruption on Economic Development				
1	Economic growth is impeded by corruption by discouraging investment, increasing costs of doing business, and lowering productivity.	3.91	0.83	True
2	Corrupted public funds, then followed by private ownership, results in inefficient resource allocation.	4.15	0.79	True
3	Corruption exacerbates poverty and inequality by restricted access to health, education, and infrastructure.	3.71	0.91	True
4	Lack of transparency and accountability in the system, corruption hinders foreign investment.	4.45	0.73	True
Impact of Corruption on Social Welfare				
5	Corruption hinders access to social services including health, education, and safe drinking water.	4.10	0.85	True
6	Corruption undermines education by restricting access to good quality schools.	4.55	0.69	True
7	Corruption results in high rates of fatalities including maternal deaths.	4.31	0.81	True
8	Corruption prevents progress in education and impairs learning outcomes.	4.11	0.84	True
9	Corruption generates social unrest and inequality, and prevents access to essential services.	4.14	0.83	True
Average		4.16	0.82	Very
Total				Good

Source: Author's Survey (2026)

The average of the aforementioned statement in table 3 stands at 4.16 and, the standard deviation of 0.82 indicating, the higher number of respondents who affirmed being in the positive range. This indicates that the greater number of respondents felt that the negative impact of corruption on the social welfare and the economic development of Nigerians was of lesser valence, the large number of respondents being in the positive range on the impact of corruption on social welfare and economic development of Nigerians.

Table 4: Correlation Analysis of Descriptive Analysis

Correlation Analysis	R	Interpretation
Corruption & Economic Development	.69**	Strong negative effect
Corruption & Social Welfare	.72**	Strong negative effect
Corruption & Resource Allocation	.66**	Significant distortion

(p < .01)

Table 6: Regression Summary

Model	B	p-value	Interpretation
Corruption → Economic Development	.62	.001	Significant negative effect
Corruption → Social Welfare	.58	.003	Significant negative effect
Corruption → Resource Allocation	.55	.002	Significant misallocation

The regression analysis indicates that corruption exerts a statistically significant influence on all development indicators examined in this study. The strongest effect was observed on economic development ($\beta = 0.62$), followed by social welfare ($\beta = 0.58$) and resource allocation ($\beta = 0.55$). These results suggest that corruption affects economic outcomes both directly and indirectly through its influence on public resource distribution and institutional effectiveness. The findings imply that reducing corruption could substantially improve development outcomes by enhancing investment opportunities, increasing public service efficiency, and strengthening governance performance.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide robust evidence that corruption remains one of the most significant barriers to sustainable economic development and social welfare advancement in Nigeria. The quantitative and qualitative results jointly demonstrate that corruption undermines productive investment, weakens institutional performance, distorts public resource allocation, and reduces citizens' access to essential public services. These findings reinforce the political economy argument that corruption is not merely an administrative deficiency but a structural governance challenge embedded within institutional arrangements and power relations.

The descriptive analysis revealed strong agreement among respondents that corruption impedes economic growth, discourages investment, and reduces productivity. Respondents also agreed that corruption leads to inefficient allocation of public resources and contributes significantly to poverty and inequality. The high mean scores recorded across all corruption-related indicators

(overall mean = 4.16) reflect these findings. The implication is that citizens across Nigeria's geopolitical zones perceive corruption as a central factor responsible for the country's persistent developmental challenges.

The correlation analysis further demonstrated strong relationships between corruption and key development outcomes. Corruption was strongly associated with reduced economic development ($r = 0.69$), declining social welfare ($r = 0.72$), and distorted resource allocation ($r = 0.66$). These findings indicate that corruption exerts multidimensional effects extending beyond economic performance to social and institutional outcomes. The regression results provide further empirical support, showing that corruption significantly predicts lower levels of economic development ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$), poorer social welfare outcomes ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), and increased resource misallocation ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$).

The findings strongly support rent-seeking theory. According to Tullock et al. (2019), rent-seeking behaviour occurs when individuals or groups exploit political power to obtain economic benefits without contributing to productive activities. The qualitative evidence from respondents regarding diversion of public funds, phantom projects, inflated contracts, and elite capture demonstrates how public resources are routinely redirected toward private interests rather than productive investments. This pattern contributes to reduced infrastructure development, declining investor confidence, and slower economic growth. Therefore, the findings validate the argument that rent-seeking behaviour creates inefficiencies that constrain national development. The study also provides empirical support for social contract theory. Acemoglu and Robinson (2020) argue that governments derive legitimacy from their ability to provide public goods and improve citizens' welfare. Findings from this study revealed that corruption limits access to healthcare, education, potable water, and infrastructure. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that corruption contributes to social exclusion, educational decline, and deteriorating living standards. These outcomes indicate a weakening of the social contract between citizens and the state. As public services deteriorate, public trust in governmental institutions declines, creating conditions for social dissatisfaction and governance instability.

Furthermore, the findings validate principal-agent theory. According to Bergman and Lane (2021), corruption thrives when public officials operate in environments characterised by weak monitoring, limited transparency, and ineffective accountability systems. Interview participants consistently identified inadequate oversight mechanisms, political interference, and weak enforcement institutions as major drivers of corruption in Nigeria. The persistence of these institutional weaknesses allows public officials to pursue private interests at the expense of collective welfare. Consequently, governance failures become self-reinforcing, leading to reduced institutional credibility and weakened public confidence.

The findings are consistent with previous empirical studies. Adekunle (2022) found that corruption significantly reduces economic growth by discouraging domestic and foreign investment. Similarly, Ogbuagu (2023) reported that corruption contributes to widening social inequalities through unequal access to public services and economic opportunities. The present study confirms these findings while extending the analysis by demonstrating how economic and social consequences of corruption are interconnected within a broader political economy framework.

The findings also support the work of Ite (2024), who identified corruption and elite domination within Nigeria's oil sector as major constraints on national development. However, unlike Ite's sector-specific analysis, the present study adopts a broader national perspective, revealing that corruption affects multiple sectors simultaneously, including healthcare, education,

infrastructure, and public administration. This broader scope provides a more comprehensive understanding of corruption's systemic effects on development outcomes.

The results further align with evidence presented in ECOGEN-related studies. Fajar and Azhar (2019) found that corruption perception negatively affects economic growth in Southeast Asian countries. Likewise, Jauhari and Choiri (2024) reported that governance quality significantly influences human development outcomes within ASEAN countries. The current findings extend these studies by demonstrating that governance quality and corruption remain equally critical determinants of development outcomes within the Nigerian context. The consistency of these findings across different regions suggests that institutional quality remains a fundamental requirement for sustainable development in emerging economies.

An important contribution of this study is the integration of corruption, governance, economic development, and social welfare within a single analytical framework. Previous studies have generally examined these variables separately. By combining rent-seeking theory, social contract theory, and principal-agent theory, this study demonstrates how institutional weaknesses facilitate corruption, how corruption undermines economic performance, and how both processes ultimately reduce citizens' welfare. This integrated framework contributes to political economy literature by providing a holistic explanation of Nigeria's development paradox.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that anti-corruption efforts should move beyond punitive measures and focus on institutional reforms. Strengthening transparency systems, improving public financial management, enhancing citizen participation, expanding digital governance mechanisms, and increasing accountability within public institutions are necessary steps toward reducing corruption and improving development outcomes. Sustainable economic growth and social welfare improvements will require governance reforms capable of addressing the structural causes of corruption rather than merely its symptoms.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between corruption, economic development, and social welfare within Nigeria's political economy framework using a mixed-method approach. The findings revealed that corruption significantly undermines economic growth, distorts public resource allocation, weakens governance institutions, and reduces access to essential social services. The study further established that institutional weaknesses, elite capture, and inadequate accountability mechanisms remain critical drivers of corruption in Nigeria.

The findings support rent-seeking theory, social contract theory, and principal-agent theory by demonstrating how governance failures facilitate corruption and constrain development outcomes. The study contributes to the literature by integrating economic, institutional, and social dimensions of corruption within a unified political economy framework.

The study recommends strengthening anti-corruption institutions, enhancing transparency in public financial management, expanding digital governance systems, improving accountability mechanisms, and increasing investment in education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Such reforms are essential for rebuilding public trust, improving social welfare, and promoting sustainable economic development.

Future studies should employ longitudinal datasets and comparative cross-country analyses to further explore the dynamic relationship between corruption, governance quality, and development outcomes in developing economies

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Nathan Udoinyang conceptualised the study, designed the methodology, analysed the data, and prepared the original manuscript draft. **Nsikan Udoinyang** participated in data collection, questionnaire administration, and literature review. **Dickson Okwudiri Alimezie** contributed to data interpretation, manuscript review, editing, and final proofreading of the article.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no financial, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the outcome of this research.

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