

Transformational Leadership and Sustainable Development in Nigeria: Bridging the Gap between Policy and Implementation

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Abstract

The concept of transformational leadership is essential for driving sustainable development in Nigeria, particularly in addressing the persistent gap between policy formulation and implementation. Despite the establishment of numerous national and international development policies, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Nigeria continues to face challenges such as poor governance, corruption, weak institutional capacity, and lack of accountability, which hinder effective implementation. This paper explores the role of transformational leadership in bridging this gap by fostering visionary thinking, ethical governance, innovation, and strategic execution. Transformational leaders inspire and mobilize stakeholders, creating a culture of accountability and encouraging innovative solutions to developmental challenges. By emphasizing intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, transformational leaders empower communities and institutions to adopt sustainable practices across key sectors such as energy, agriculture, infrastructure, and education. Moreover, transformational leadership enhances policy advocacy and institutional reforms, ensuring that development efforts are aligned with long-term environmental, social, and economic priorities. The paper argues that sustainable development in Nigeria requires leaders who can translate policy objectives into measurable outcomes by driving collaboration between government agencies, private sector actors, and civil society. Transformational leadership not only strengthens institutional frameworks but also cultivates a culture of resilience and adaptability, positioning Nigeria to achieve inclusive and sustainable growth. This study highlights the transformative potential of visionary leadership in overcoming governance barriers and ensuring that sustainable development initiatives yield tangible and lasting benefits for future generations.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Sustainable Development, Policy Implementation, Governance, Nigeria.

Introduction

Leadership plays a pivotal role in the development trajectory of any nation. The interplay between transformational leadership and sustainable development has been a subject of debate, particularly in the light of the country's persistent socio-economic challenges. Development is a basic requirement for every society. Thus nation states invest heavily in order to improve the living standards of its citizens. Nigeria has been considered by many scholars as one of the most naturally endowed geographical entities in the world. However, its rich human and natural resources have not been efficiently and effectively utilized to meet its developmental goals. Meaningful development, no matter how endowed a country might be is highly dependent on the quality of its leadership (Tangban and Audu, 2020). Despite the country's vast oil wealth, fertile agricultural land, and entrepreneurial population, the nation faces issues such as poor

governance, infrastructural deficits, corruption, insecurity and economic instability, which have hindered its progress. These challenges have persisted since independence in 1960.

Historically, Nigeria has witnessed various leadership styles, from military rule to democratic governance, each with varying impacts on development. While some leaders have championed economic reforms and infrastructural development, others have failed to translate policies into actionable progress. The key challenge remains the inability to implement long-term strategies that foster sustainable development beyond political tenures (Ekpo and Chime, 2021). In Nigeria, achieving sustainable development requires effective policy formulation and more importantly, seamless implementation. However, the country has often struggled with bridging the gap between well –intended policies and their actual execution. Issues such as corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, political instability, and lack of accountability have continuously impeded progress (Ajakaiye and Tella, 2020).

Transformational leadership, characterized by vision, integrity, and inclusiveness, has the potential to drive sustainable development by ensuring consistency in governance, promoting institutional effectiveness, and enhancing public trust. It is in view of the above and other related issues that this article examines the critical link between transformational leadership and sustainable development in Nigeria. It highlights the challenges hindering policy implementation and proposes strategic measures to bridge the gap. By fostering a leadership culture that prioritizes accountability, innovation, and long-term planning, Nigeria can overcome its developmental hurdles and achieve sustainable development.

Conceptualizing Transformational Leadership and Sustainable Development

Transformational leadership and sustainable development are two interrelated concepts that influence organizational growth, societal progress, and environmental responsibility. Before delving into the conceptualization of transformational leadership, it is imperative to briefly examine the concept of leadership. Attempts to define leadership can be categorized into conceptual, construction, and typology frameworks. Grint's four factors conceptual categorization holds that leadership as a person, position, result, and process (Grint, 2010). For Grint, person leadership concerns who an individual is and the inherent traits and exhibited behaviours that lead others to perceive them as a leader. For position leadership, the where are the analytical thrust-it focuses on an individual's occupancy of a station or rank within a system or group. Result based leadership is about the performance ability and what outcomes are achieved. Process based leadership combines who, what, and where to understand the how and why of leadership (Murphy, 1941). It interrogates how individuals use the multifarious elements of the aforementioned perspectives to attain and maintain leadership (Ibe and Tiger, 2024).

Leaders are the key player and essential elements for enhancing organizational performance as they are policy makers. It includes the duties of a leader to develop a cooperative work environment and motivate the workforce in order to accomplish organizational targets (Yukl, 2013). Leadership is the ability of an individual to influence, motivate and empower others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members (Adegeye, 2015). On his part, Fola (2015), opined that leadership is the ability to provide selfless service to others, equipping with training, motivating and inspiring people with a view to working together to achieve a common goal.

It is a behaviour that brings the future to the present by envisioning the possible and influencing others to make the vision while leaving the path for others to mature into leaders. According to Obinna (2013), leadership is viewed as culture context specific capacity to inspire or induce individuals to give their best to achieve a desired result and to maintain effective and healthy relationships. In more practical and simple terms, leadership can be seen as the ability to get a person or group of persons to do what you want them to do, when you want it done, in the way you want it done because it is necessary to be done (Jimogu, 2011).

The concept of transformational leadership was first introduced by Burns (1978), in his descriptive research on political leaders and on visionary leaders for a progressive and sustainable society. It is a form or style of leadership that focuses on inspiring and motivating followers to achieve higher levels of performance and personal growth. It involves creating a vision for the future, communicating that vision in a compelling way, empowering and supporting others to work towards that vision. It is a leadership process that is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards and long-term goals and includes accessing people's motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as rational human beings.

It involves an exceptional form of influence that moves followers to accomplish more than what is usually expected of them. Charismatic and visionary leaders are important elements of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2004). According to Bass and Riggio (2006), transformational leadership involves leaders who inspire and motivate followers through a compelling vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and charismatic leadership. This approach is not only pivotal in organizational contexts but also holds significant implications for addressing the unique challenges faced by developing nations. As nations navigate economic volatility, political uncertainties, and cultural diversity, effective leadership becomes paramount for surmounting such challenges.

Transformational leadership theories go beyond the traditional leadership approach by touching the ethical, social, and spiritual phenomena. It stresses on the beliefs, abilities, education, perception, and socio-economic status of the leader (Miao et al, 2006). Transformational leaders empower and nurture citizens towards positive change; raise their consciousness and get them to transcend their own self-interests for the sake of others; act as strong role models for the country with a highly developed set of moral values and a self-determined sense of identity, confidence, competence, articulate with strong ideas and character. Most importantly, transformational leadership possesses the capacity to create a vision that is consensual which can initiate and implement new directions for the country (Osuigwe, 2014).

Transformational leadership has these key characteristics: visionary, thinking, charisma and inspiration, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, empowerment and trust, effective communication, emotional intelligence and continuous improvement (Bass and Avolio, 1994). Transformational leadership, characterized by its ability to inspire and elevate followers beyond self-interest, has gained prominence as a critical determinant of organizational and national development. This leadership paradigm transcends conventional models, emphasizing a visionary approach that fosters innovation and collective success. In the context of developing nations, where socio-economic challenges and opportunities intersect, the role of transformational leadership becomes particularly pronounced (Ughulu, 2024). Transformational

leadership will afford Nigeria the necessary leadership quality that is central to revitalizing the country's socio-economic and political development (Onwudiwe, 2017). Therefore, the role of leadership in an organization or nation for increased profitability and sustainable development cannot be overemphasized.

The concept of development has been viewed differently. However, there are key variables that must be evident in every definition. The definition must take into cognizance that development must be related to change in the society, and this change must not only be positive but also a conscious one. Development is the positive and conscious transformation of a society and its people (Ibe and Tiger, 2024). Therefore, development can be seen in terms of the condition of life, as a goal, and as the capacity to grow, change, and finally develop. According to Thomas (2008), development is simply referred to as "good change" or "positive growth." This means any change that is "beneficial" to society is development: increased living standards, improved health and wellbeing for all, and the achievement of whatever is regarded as general good for society at large.

Albert et al (2012), argued that development is not only restricted to the concept of modernization where supposedly, there are chains of industries, good road networks, beautiful urban development and so forth. If all these are achieved and yet, the greater mass of the populace still remains mal-nourished, illiterate, unemployed, unhealthy and generally poor, it means that such a country is not yet developed. If there is the presence of infrastructural development and yet there is no discipline for the rule of law in the polity, such a country is still not developed. From the foregoing, we can say that development means advancement or improvement on the people's well-being and progress in the society (Obama, 2016). On the whole, development can be viewed as a way of utilizing the natural, economic, and human resources for the advancement of the society for the over-all benefits of the members of the society.

Several definitions of sustainable development have been given since the notion emerged in the 1980s, as a desirable guiding principle for the world community. To highlight the inherent pluralism in this notion, we consider sustainable development to be a quest for developing and sustaining "quality of life." In this way, it encompasses the subjective and objective dimensions of human well-being, inviting a truly transdisciplinary approach (de Vries and Petersen, 2009). According to the Brundtland Commission (1987), sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In his own analysis, Daly (1990), opined that sustainable development is development without growth beyond environmental carrying capacity, where qualitative improvement replaces quantitative increase. In other words, sustainable development is the efforts of government (federal, state or local) to improve the environment and the living conditions of the people in such a way as not to negatively affect generations to come.

Sustainable development refers to the continuous improvement in the living standard of citizens and the structural transformation/changes in the productive and distributive input and output systems of the economy. Furthermore, Barbier (1987), emphasizes the interconnectedness of environmental and economic systems when he observed that sustainable development is one that simultaneously maximizes the goals of biological system viability, economic efficiency, and

social desirability. Sustainable development emphasizes that development should lead to poverty eradication (with people participating in decision making that affect their lives); job creation and sustainable livelihood; women empowerment and effective participation; and environmental protection. It is important to note that to make development sustainable at whatever level, be it national or global; societies must seek to achieve development objectives that will ensure constant stock of environmental assets for future generations by avoiding irreversible damage to any single asset (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 1990). Therefore, sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and sundry and extending to all the opportunities to satisfy their aspirations for a better life (Ahule, 2013). This aspect of change in human society is the most cherishable brand of development which all nations (societies) aspire to attain.

Challenges of Leadership and Policy Implementation in Nigeria

Nigeria faces myriad of challenges in leadership and policy implementation. These challenges have profound implications for its socio-economic development and the well-being of its citizens. The success of governance in any organized political setting is determined largely by the quality and quantity of change brought about by its leadership, which means that the development of any organized political system is greatly influenced by the quality of leadership in government (Tangban and Audu, 2020). Nigeria's economy has grappled with persistent challenges, including infrastructural deficit, high inflation, currency devaluation, and sluggish growth. These crisis have been interrogated by many scholars and several reasons have been adduced for Nigeria's phenomenal backwardness (Onimode, 2000), but the bottom line remains that serious leadership crisis have resulted in the inability of the country to achieve sustainable development (Mohammed, 2020). The lack of essential infrastructure and services such as roads and bridges, water, electricity, a reliable telephone, and other communications systems hinders sustainable development (Okpara, 2011).

In an effort to stabilize the economy, the government has implemented significant reforms, such as unifying exchange rates and reducing fuel subsidies. While these measures aim to strengthen public finances and promote non-oil sector growth, they have also led to short-term hardships, including increased fuel prices and heightened inflation. Sustaining these reforms requires unwavering political commitment and effective policy execution to ensure long-term economic stability. Therefore, leadership qualities of sound ethical and or moral standards in the realm of governance is what is needed if there is going to be sustainable development in all strata of society. Sadly, in Nigeria this is far from the case as most leaders failed to lead by example, the rule of law has on several occasions been disregarded by the ruling elite and the standard of morality does not inspire the young Nigerian populace in search of a concrete leadership model.

The implication of this is that it has widened the trust deficit between the leaders and the citizens. The inability of Nigerian leaders to effectively and efficiently exploit the abundant human and material resources has hindered sustainable development. However one looks at it, governance is essentially concerned with the efficient and effective management of a society and its resources in such a way as to ensure the realization of sustainable development goals (Tangban and Audu, 2020). The glaring lack of accountability, transparency and citizens involvement in the activities of the state, has served as active drawbacks to the development potential of the nation.

These challenges have further been exacerbated by corruption. Corruption in Nigeria seems to have acquired immunity against various political and legal measures aimed to curb the menace of corruption over the decades. The problem stifling economic development, eroding public bureaucratic efficiency, widening inequality, and undermining the creation of opportunities and delivery of social services for the citizens, especially those who are socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged are all attributed to corruption. In this regard, the government is viewed as insensitive and unresponsive to the yearnings, wishes and aspirations of its citizens. Several laws and institutions have been enacted and created by successive governments in Nigeria to curb corrupt practices. But rather than abating, corrupt practices have become endemic even within law enforcement and anti-corruption agencies in the country and consequently, engendered cynicism among citizens as well as impunity among the rulers and officials of government and private enterprises (John and Luma, 2025).

Corruption remains a pervasive issue undermining policy implementation in Nigeria. For instance, the Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP), established to address oil pollution in the Niger Delta, has been marred by allegations of mismanagement and corruption. Investigations revealed that funds allocated for environmental cleanup were misappropriated, with contracts awarded to unqualified firms, many linked to political figures. This not only hampers environmental restoration efforts but also erodes public trust in governmental initiatives. Environmental challenges such as plastic pollution have prompted policy responses like the planned ban on single-use plastics. However, the readiness for such bans is questionable, as awareness and infrastructure to support alternatives are lacking. Without comprehensive strategies and public engagement, well-intentioned policies may fail to achieve their objectives.

Nigeria is currently dealing with a severe economic crisis that is characterized by political unrest, volatile markets, and rising unemployment rates (Abdulrazaq and Lambe, 2024). The widespread issue of unemployment in the country has emerged as a critical impediment to the nation's sustained economic growth and development. This challenge has given rise to a plethora of social ills, including fraud, kidnapping, armed robbery, destitution, prostitution, terrorism, and political thuggery (Okoye et al, 2018). The vitality of any country's progress hinges significantly on the resourcefulness of its youth population, underscoring the importance of their training and planned entrepreneurial endeavours (Olajide and Akejenu, 2017). Consequently, fostering youth employment and augmenting the per capita income of the economy are vital indicators of growth and development. In the face of these challenges, the nation stands poised for transformative change, with agriculture and manufacturing as focal points for revitalization.

The agricultural sector, once the cornerstone of Nigeria's economy, now faces numerous obstacles, from outdated practices to limited access to modern technologies. Concurrently, the nation's youth, brimming with untapped potential in technological innovation, encounter barriers such as inadequate education and restricted resources, hindering their entrepreneurial aspirations and exacerbating unemployment. In Nigeria, frequent cabinet reshuffles and policy discontinuities over the years, poses significant challenges to effective governance. Such changes can disrupt policy continuity and impede long-term planning, an important aspect of sustainable development.

The indebtedness to richer nations and foreign institutions is one of the leadership and developmental problem facing Nigeria today. This has been a major challenge to the sustainable development of Nigeria's ailing economy. Nigeria's external indebtedness dates back to the pre-independence era. However, the quantum of the debt was small until 1978. The debts incurred before 1978 were mainly long-term loans from multilateral and official sources such as the World Bank and the country's major trading partners. The debts were not much of a burden on the economy because the loans were obtained on soft terms. Moreover, the country had abundant revenue receipts from oil, especially during the oil boom of 1973-1976 (Udoka and Ogege, 2012). Nigeria's external debt has risen to an astronomical level. For instance, under the Buhari's administration alone, public debt rose from N12.6 trillion in 2015 to N97.3 trillion in 2023 (Nairametrics, 2024). Furthermore, data from the Debt Management Office (DMO) shows that, from December, 2023 to March 2024, Nigeria's public debt stood at N121.67 trillion (\$91.46 billion).

Debt servicing costs have become so high that they consume over 90% of Nigeria's revenue. This debt burden threatens Nigeria's ability to finance essential services like health, education, and social welfare (Pulse News, 2024). All these have further led the Nigerian government to seek more loans and aid from developed foreign nations to finance her essential services. The debt burden has deeply pauperized the masses and resulted in widespread poverty, massive youth unemployment, hunger, economic deprivation as well as the removal of fuel subsidy with its attendant multifaceted negative consequences on the lives of Nigerians (Musa et al, 2025).

In addition, the current Tinubu administration's major economic policies are offshoots of General Babangida's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) designed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) as reflected in complete fuel subsidy removal and foreign exchange reforms which resulted in high inflation, devaluation of the naira which led to widespread disruption of the economic structure, monetary, and fiscal policy crises as well as foreign exchange crises. These policies are targeted to deepen the perpetual economic dependence of Nigeria orchestrated and masterminded by the Breton Wood Institutions of the World Bank and IMF. The administration has so far removed subsidies in vital sectors of the economy such as petroleum, education, power, and agriculture and the government has also increased income tax, value-added tax, all in an attempt to meet the conditionality's for more loans and aids from the international financial institutions (Vanguard News, 2024).

The legitimacy of electoral processes is crucial for stable governance. Unfortunately, since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the country's electoral process has been marred by electoral violence, and allegations of fraud, undermining public confidence in democratic institutions. There can be no democratic election, democratization, consolidation of democracy, growth in democratic culture or internalization of best democratic practice in any country if electoral violence is prevalent. Equally, no peaceful, secure, free and fair civilian-to-civilian transfer of power can take place without first purging the electoral process and the country of such infestations of violence. Violence limits people's participation in the electoral process enables the imposition of candidates, programmes, and policies which in turn, may be inimical to the sustainable development trajectory of the country (Ameh-Ogigo, 2025). Elections play an important role in the life of a nation. It is one essential way by which citizens choose their leaders, and by so doing, contribute meaningfully to the identification of the kind of development

they would like to see (Albert and Adetula, 2007). Electoral violence in Nigeria remains a significant challenge to democratic consolidation. Despite the progress made since the return to civilian rule in May, 1999, the persistence of electoral violence undermines the integrity of the electoral process, weakens public trust in democratic institutions, and hampers effective governance.

Addressing Governance Deficit in Nigeria

Governance deficit in Nigeria refers to the gap between the expectations of citizens and the actual performance of government institutions in delivering essential services, ensuring transparency, and upholding the rule of law. This deficit stems from weak institutional frameworks, poor leadership accountability, corruption, and inadequate policy implementation. To address this governance deficit, several key strategies are essential:

- i. **Strengthening Institutional Frameworks:** Effective governance requires strong and independent institutions that can function without political interference. Reforming institutions such as the judiciary, anti-corruption agencies, and electoral bodies will enhance their ability to enforce laws and maintain public trust.
- ii. **Promoting Transparency and Accountability:** Ensuring that government activities are open to public scrutiny is crucial for reducing corruption and improving public confidence. Mechanisms such as public expenditure tracking, performance audits, and open government initiatives can help promote greater accountability. Notably, Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) reported recovering nearly \$500 million in proceeds of crime in the past year and secured over 4,000 criminal convictions, marking its most successful year since its founding over two decades ago.
- iii. **Enhancing Leadership Capacity:** Investing in leadership development and training for public officials will improve decision-making and policy implementation. Leaders should be equipped with the skills to manage resources effectively and respond to emerging challenges.
- iv. **Citizen Participation and Engagement:** Encouraging active citizen participation in governance processes will help bridge the gap between the government and the people. Platforms for feedback, town hall meetings, and consultative forums can strengthen the link between policy decisions and public needs.
- v. **Policy Consistency and Implementation:** One of the major challenges in Nigeria's governance is the inconsistency in policy implementation. Establishing clear frameworks for monitoring and evaluating policies will ensure that government programs achieve their intended outcomes. By addressing these governance gaps, Nigeria can foster a more stable and accountable political environment, leading to improved public service delivery and enhanced national development.

Conclusion

Transformational leadership holds the key to unlocking the full potential of sustainable development in Nigeria by bridging the persistent gap between policy formulation and effective implementation. While Nigeria has established numerous policies and frameworks aimed at achieving sustainable development — including commitments to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national economic plans — the challenge lies in translating these policies into measurable and lasting outcomes. This disconnect stems from governance

inefficiencies, weak institutional capacity, corruption, and limited stakeholder engagement. Transformational leadership, characterized by visionary thinking, ethical governance, innovation, and empowerment, can provide the strategic direction needed to overcome these challenges. Leaders who embody transformational qualities can inspire confidence and collective action among policymakers, institutions, and communities. By fostering a culture of accountability and adaptability, transformational leaders can drive the adoption of sustainable practices in key sectors such as energy, agriculture, infrastructure, and education. Furthermore, by emphasizing intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, transformational leaders can cultivate a new generation of innovative problem-solvers and responsible citizens who are equipped to address the complex challenges of sustainable development.

For sustainable development to be effectively implemented in Nigeria, leaders must not only articulate a clear and compelling vision but also align institutional frameworks, resources, and human capital toward achieving that vision. This requires a shift from short-term political gains to long-term national interests, with an emphasis on environmental preservation, social equity, and economic inclusion. By integrating transformational leadership principles into governance and development strategies, Nigeria can create an enabling environment where sustainable development thrives, ensuring prosperity and stability for future generations. Ultimately, bridging the gap between policy and implementation demands a leadership style that not only inspires but also mobilizes action, fosters innovation, and strengthens institutional capacity. Transformational leadership, grounded in ethical values and forward-thinking strategies, has the potential to transform Nigeria's developmental trajectory, creating a resilient and sustainable future.

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