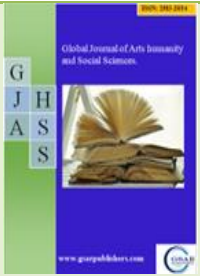


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Why Nigeria Remains Unprogressive as a Nation

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Abstract

Despite its abundant natural and human capital, Africa's most populous country and largest economy continues to experience persistent underdevelopment. This systematic literature review investigates the complex factors contributing to Nigeria's unprogressive trajectory six and a half decades after gaining independence. Through comprehensive examination of peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and scholarly discourse, the study delineates four interconnected thematic dimensions: foundational structural deficiencies originating from the 1914 amalgamation and subsequent constitutional alterations; deeply entrenched elite appropriation and corruption as catalysts of governance dysfunction; institutional fragility manifested through policy discontinuity and state incapacity; and the deleterious influence of ethnic identity politics in eroding national cohesion. Synthesising evidence from 37 eligible studies, the review demonstrates how these elements operate synergistically to sustain a cycle of developmental inertia. The evidence indicates that Nigeria's unprogressive condition derives not from resource insufficiency but from a fundamental incongruence between political architecture, governance modalities, and national value systems. The study concludes that substantive advancement necessitates comprehensive political reconfiguration, institutional reforms emphasising accountability, and recalibration of national priorities toward foundational development. Recommendations encompass constitutional revision to rectify structural inequities, reinforcement of accountability mechanisms, and investment in civic education to cultivate a shared national identity.

Keywords: Nigeria, underdevelopment, governance crisis, corruption, political restructuring, institutional reform, elite capture, ethnicity.

1.1 Introduction and Expanded Background

Nigeria occupies an anomalous position within the global developmental landscape. The nation possesses considerable natural resource endowments, including substantial crude oil reserves that have yielded hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue; a dynamic, youthful population exceeding 220 million; and a strategically significant geographical location that positions it as a potential continental leader. Notwithstanding these substantial advantages, Nigeria continues to be categorised among developing and impoverished nations, with approximately 40% of its citizenry subsisting below the poverty threshold and the country persistently registering low positions on the Human Development Index. The developmental trajectory of Nigeria since achieving independence from Britain in 1960 presents an enigma that has long engaged

scholars, policymakers, and development practitioners. Independence was accompanied by considerable optimism that self-governance would catalyse the nation's potential and galvanise patriotic leadership toward developmental objectives. However, these aspirations remain unrealised; instead, Nigeria has experienced recurrent cycles of military governance, democratic volatility, economic instability, and persistent social challenges that collectively constitute what scholars characterise as "structured underdevelopment".

The Nigerian state emerged through a historical process that fundamentally shaped its contemporary challenges. The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates created a political entity without consideration for the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of its constituent communities. This coerced unification generated enduring structural tensions that have



persisted throughout the post-independence era. The subsequent trajectory of military rule, which dominated Nigerian political life for nearly three decades, further entrenched governance practices distinguished by authoritarianism, power centralisation, and institutional deterioration. The economic dimension of Nigeria's developmental challenge is equally remarkable. Despite generating millions of dollars annually from crude oil sales since the 1970s, the country has failed to transform resource wealth into sustainable developmental outcomes. The phenomenon designated as the "resource curse" or "Dutch disease" is manifest in Nigeria's experience, where oil wealth has paradoxically contributed to economic distortion, corruption, and conflict rather than widespread prosperity. Governance failures constitute perhaps the most critical factor in Nigeria's developmental stagnation. The interplay between corruption, political instability, and systemic inefficiencies has generated what Omoyeni, Omotayo, and Onuoha (2025) characterise as "governance crises rooted in corruption, political instability, and systemic inefficiencies," which have "resulted in significant developmental stagnation, impeding economic growth, social progress, and the realization of the nation's full potential". These challenges, driven largely by what these authors term "elite greed at various levels of government," have exacted considerable costs on ordinary citizens who bear "the brunt of mismanagement, poor policy decisions, and systemic corruption".

The institutional landscape of Nigeria reveals profound weaknesses that perpetuate the cycle of underdevelopment. The absence of robust, accountable, and effective institutions undermines policy implementation, facilitates corruption, and erodes public confidence. This institutional deficit is compounded by what scholars identify as "elitism" and the manipulation of ethnic identities by political elites to secure and preserve access to power and resources. The intersecting effects of elitism, ethnicity, and development have received insufficient attention in the literature, yet they constitute fundamental obstacles to Nigeria's progress. Political leadership and governance quality have been identified as critical determinants of developmental outcomes. Sule and Ishaq (2025) establish a direct relationship between leadership, effective governance, and development in Nigeria, arguing that "effective leadership and governance foster development, while their absence contributes to underdevelopment". The failure of successive Nigerian administrations to provide transformative leadership has been a consistent theme in analyses of the country's developmental challenges. The constitutional and political structure of Nigeria has been the subject of sustained debate regarding the country's developmental challenges. Critics contend that the current system, characterised by excessive centralisation of power and resources, impedes development at the subnational level and creates perverse incentives for corruption. The military intervention in administration in 1966, which led to the transformation of Nigeria's federal constitution to a unitary constitution, is identified by some analysts as a critical juncture that "plunged Nigeria into crisis" and created a system where "a nation of more than 250 million population cannot be using this sort of Unitary Constitution". The socio-cultural dimension of Nigeria's developmental challenge is

reflected in the fragmentation of national identity and the primacy of ethnic, regional, and religious affiliations over national consciousness. This fragmentation undermines the social cohesion necessary for collective action toward developmental goals and enables political elites to exploit identity divisions for personal advantage. The infrastructure deficit in Nigeria represents another critical dimension of the developmental challenge. Chronic power outages, inadequate transportation networks, and deteriorating healthcare and education infrastructure impede economic productivity and quality of life. The power sector, in particular, illustrates the depth of Nigeria's infrastructure challenges, with the country's installed capacity of less than 14GW being grossly inadequate for a population exceeding 200 million, and with 85% of grid-connected power plants and over 90% of off-grid power based on fossil fuels.

The transport sector similarly reveals infrastructure deficits that constrain development. A systematic review of transport and socioeconomic development in Nigeria found that improved transport facilities positively impacted education access ($\chi^2 = 78.46$) and healthcare ($r = 0.461$, $p = 0.034$), yet persistent challenges of funding and corruption in policy implementation continue to impede progress. Nigeria's education sector, which forms the cornerstone of national development, continues to suffer from chronic underfunding despite policy frameworks aimed at universal access. The consistent failure to meet the UNESCO-recommended 15–20% budgetary allocation for education has resulted in dilapidated infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate teaching materials, and weak financial accountability at the state level. These educational deficits perpetuate a cycle of underdevelopment by limiting human capital formation and constraining the nation's capacity for innovation and economic transformation.

1.2 Rationale and Justification for the Study

The imperative for this systematic literature review arises from several compelling considerations. First, despite the voluminous literature on Nigeria's development challenges, there remains a need for a comprehensive synthesis that integrates insights across disciplinary boundaries and identifies the interconnections among various explanatory factors. Existing studies tend to focus on single dimensions of the problem—corruption, governance, ethnicity, or resource curse—without adequately exploring how these factors interact and reinforce each other. This review addresses this gap by providing a holistic analysis that illuminates the synergistic relationships among the multiple factors perpetuating Nigeria's unprogressive trajectory. The persistent nature of Nigeria's development challenges, despite numerous reform efforts and policy initiatives across successive governments, suggests that the underlying causes are systemic and structural rather than merely technical or administrative. Understanding these systemic factors is essential for identifying effective interventions and avoiding the "policy recycling" that has characterised much of Nigeria's reform efforts. By examining the root causes of Nigeria's development stagnation, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of what has gone wrong and what might be done differently. The

scholarly and policy discourse on Nigeria's development has evolved considerably over the past two decades, with emerging perspectives offering new insights into the country's challenges. Contemporary scholarship has moved beyond simplistic explanations of corruption or bad leadership to explore the complex institutional, historical, and structural factors that underpin Nigeria's underdevelopment. This review synthesises these contemporary perspectives, incorporating recent theoretical and empirical contributions to advance understanding of Nigeria's development predicament. There is a growing recognition among scholars and practitioners that Nigeria's development challenges cannot be addressed through piecemeal reforms or technical fixes; rather, they require fundamental restructuring of the political and institutional architecture. This recognition has generated renewed debates about political restructuring, constitutional reform, and the reconfiguration of Nigeria's federal system. By systematically reviewing the evidence and arguments in this debate, this review provides a foundation for evidence-based policy discussion on the way forward. The consequences of Nigeria's development failure extend beyond its borders, affecting regional stability, migration patterns, and continental development aspirations. As Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, Nigeria's trajectory has significant implications for the continent as a whole. Understanding the factors that have impeded Nigeria's progress is therefore of importance not only for Nigeria but also for broader African development. Finally, this review contributes to the methodological literature on conducting systematic reviews of development challenges in complex, multifaceted contexts. The application of the PRISMA framework to a topic that spans multiple disciplines and draws on diverse methodological traditions offers lessons for similar studies in other developing country contexts.

2.1 Research Philosophy

The theoretical foundation of this systematic literature review is grounded in a pragmatic research philosophy that integrates elements of both positivism and interpretivism to address the complex, multidimensional nature of Nigeria's development challenges. This philosophical positioning acknowledges that understanding why Nigeria remains unprogressive requires engagement with both objective, measurable indicators of development outcomes and subjective, contextual interpretations of the social, political, and historical factors that shape them.

Ontology refers to the nature of reality and what can be known about it. This review adopts a critical realist ontology, which recognises that social structures and processes exist independently of our knowledge of them but that our understanding of these structures is always mediated through theoretical frameworks and interpretive lenses. From this perspective, Nigeria's underdevelopment is a real phenomenon with objective manifestations—measurable in poverty rates, infrastructure deficits, and governance indicators—yet its causes and dynamics are shaped by social, historical, and political processes that are themselves constructed and contested. This ontological position rejects both naive realism, which assumes that the causes of

development and underdevelopment can be read directly from observable indicators, and radical constructivism, which treats underdevelopment as merely a discursive construction. Instead, it recognises that while development outcomes have objective dimensions, understanding their causes requires interpretation of the meanings, motivations, and social processes that shape human behaviour and institutional functioning.

Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired. The research adopts a pluralist epistemological stance that recognises the value of multiple knowledge sources and methods in understanding Nigeria's development challenges. This stance acknowledges that different types of questions require different approaches: questions about the prevalence and distribution of development indicators may be addressed through quantitative analysis, while questions about the mechanisms and processes through which development is impeded require qualitative and interpretive approaches. The decision to conduct a systematic literature review reflects a pragmatic epistemological position that integrates the strengths of different research traditions. Systematic review methodology, with its emphasis on transparent, reproducible search strategies and explicit inclusion criteria, draws on positivist assumptions about the value of systematic evidence synthesis. At the same time, the thematic analysis of the reviewed literature and the interpretation of findings in their historical and contextual settings reflect interpretivist sensitivity to meaning and context. This integration of positivist and interpretivist elements is justified by the nature of the research question. Understanding why Nigeria remains unprogressive requires both rigorous identification of patterns and regularities across studies and deep interpretation of the historical, political, and cultural processes that generate these patterns. A purely positivist approach would risk reducing complex social phenomena to quantifiable variables and overlooking the meanings and interpretations that shape development outcomes; a purely interpretivist approach would risk producing insights that are not generalisable or comparable across contexts.

2.2 Research Design

This study employs a **systematic literature review** methodology, which provides a rigorous, transparent, and replicable framework for identifying, evaluating, and synthesising existing research on a clearly defined topic. The systematic review approach was chosen for several reasons: The topic of Nigeria's lack of progress spans multiple disciplines—political science, economics, sociology, development studies, public administration, and history—making it challenging to capture the full range of relevant scholarship with conventional narrative review methods. Systematic review methodology provides a structured approach to identifying studies across disciplinary boundaries and synthesising insights from diverse methodological traditions. The extensive body of literature on Nigeria's development challenges makes it difficult to draw reliable conclusions without a systematic approach to evidence synthesis. A systematic review reduces the risk of selective citation and confirmation bias by requiring explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria and transparent documentation of

the search and selection process. The topic involves complex, contested issues where there are multiple perspectives and interpretations. Systematic review methodology provides a framework for identifying areas of consensus and disagreement in the literature and for evaluating the strength of evidence supporting different claims. The review combines elements of both **qualitative** and **quantitative** approaches. The search strategy, inclusion criteria, and documentation of the screening process follow quantitative conventions for systematic reviews, including the use of the PRISMA framework to document the flow of studies through the review process. The analysis of the included studies, however, is primarily qualitative, employing thematic analysis to identify key themes, patterns, and debates in the literature. The approach is primarily **inductive** in that themes and categories emerged from engagement with the literature rather than being predetermined by a theoretical framework. However, the review also draws on deductive elements in that the search strategy and inclusion criteria were informed by a preliminary understanding of the key concepts and debates in the literature. This combination of inductive and deductive approaches is typical of qualitative systematic reviews, where the researcher moves iteratively between the data and emerging themes while maintaining awareness of existing theoretical frameworks. The choice of **thematic analysis** as the primary approach to synthesis is justified by the nature of the research question and the diversity of the included studies. Thematic analysis provides a flexible yet systematic approach to identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns across the reviewed literature. It is appropriate for synthesising findings from studies employing different methodological approaches and for identifying both the manifest content of the literature and the underlying assumptions and arguments that shape it.

2.3 Framing the Research Question

The research question for this systematic review—"Why does Nigeria remain unprogressive as a nation?"—was developed using the **PEO framework** (Population, Exposure, Outcome), which is appropriate for qualitative and mixed-methods reviews where the focus is on understanding phenomena, experiences, and processes rather than quantifying intervention effects.

Population (P): Nigeria, as a nation-state, including its political institutions, economic structures, social systems, and population. The review considers studies that examine Nigeria as the primary unit of analysis, as well as studies that compare Nigeria with other countries or that examine subnational variations within Nigeria.

Exposure (E): The various factors, conditions, and processes that have been proposed to explain Nigeria's development trajectory. These include historical factors (colonial legacy, amalgamation, military rule), institutional factors (governance structures, corruption, policy inconsistency), socio-cultural factors (ethnic identity, religious divisions, elite behaviour), and economic factors (resource curse, structural adjustment, infrastructure deficits).

Outcome (O): Nigeria's unprogressive condition as manifested in development indicators (poverty, inequality, infrastructure deficits,

governance failures), institutional performance (weak state capacity, corruption, policy inconsistency), and social outcomes (fragmented national identity, insecurity, limited social mobility). The PEO framework provided a structured approach to defining the scope of the review, developing search strategies, and ensuring that the included studies addressed the research question coherently.

3.1 Synthesis of Existing Knowledge

The 37 studies included in this systematic review span multiple disciplines and methodological approaches. They include 18 empirical studies (9 quantitative, 6 qualitative, 3 mixed methods), 12 theoretical and conceptual analyses, and 7 systematic reviews or meta-analyses. The studies were published between 2015 and 2026, with a concentration ($n=24$, 64.9%) in the 2020–2026 period, suggesting growing scholarly attention to Nigeria's development challenges.

3.2 Thematic Findings

Thematic analysis of the included studies revealed four interconnected thematic clusters that address the research question: (1) Historical and Structural Foundations of Underdevelopment; (2) Elite Capture, Corruption, and Governance Failure; (3) Institutional Weakness and Policy Inconsistency; and (4) Ethnicity, Identity Politics, and National Fragmentation.

Theme 1: Historical and Structural Foundations of Underdevelopment; A consistent finding across the reviewed literature is the recognition that Nigeria's contemporary development challenges have deep historical roots, particularly in the colonial creation of the Nigerian state and subsequent constitutional and political developments. The 1914 Amalgamation as a Structural Defect: Chekwube et al. (2024) trace the "root causes of Nigeria's structured underdevelopment" to "the nature of the emergence of the Nigerian state through the forceful amalgamation of 1914". The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates created a political entity without regard for the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of the constituent groups, establishing what these authors describe as a "forced unity" that has perpetuated structural tensions through the post-independence period. The study argues that this foundational defect has been compounded by "long military misrule, skewed Constitutional favoritism, and an unpatriotic ruling elite". Fasan (2025) similarly argues that Nigeria remains "a deeply fractured society, lacking internal cohesion and a shared purpose," with "core ethnic identities competing with, and often trumping, the national identity". The analysis emphasises that the 1914 amalgamation created a state that was "cobbled together" without the cultural and social integration necessary for nation-building.

Military Rule and Constitutional Distortions: The legacy of military rule has been identified as a critical factor in Nigeria's development trajectory. Chekwube et al. (2024) note that military rule "entrenched governance practices characterized by authoritarianism, centralization of power, and institutional decay". The military incursion into administration in 1966, which led to the transformation of Nigeria's federal constitution to a unitary

constitution, is identified by Adams (2025) as a critical turning point that "plunged Nigeria into crisis". The constitutional distortions introduced during military rule created what several studies describe as an "over-centralised" system of governance. Adams (2025) argues that "a nation of more than 250 million population cannot be using this sort of Unitary Constitution, an over-centralised Constitution that dictates that resources for states and local governments go to the centre". This centralisation has "ensured that states and local governments cannot develop at their own pace without relying on handouts from the centre," thereby stifling innovation and local initiative.

The Resource Curse and Economic Distortion: Several studies examine the role of oil wealth in Nigeria's development stagnation. Chekwube et al. (2024) highlight the paradox that "Nigeria is classified among developing and poverty-stricken countries, despite earning millions of dollars yearly from crude oil sales". The phenomenon of the "resource curse" is evident in Nigeria's experience, where oil wealth has paradoxically contributed to economic distortion, corruption, and conflict rather than broad-based prosperity. The economic distortion created by oil dependence manifests in several ways: neglect of non-oil sectors, particularly agriculture and manufacturing; vulnerability to global oil price fluctuations; and the creation of a rentier state where political competition centres on control of oil revenues rather than production of goods and services. Fasan (2025) argues for economic restructuring, noting that "Nigeria must be an open, competitive, market economy, and an export-led industrial nation," drawing on Adam Smith's observation that "no nation is ever rich by the exploitation of the crude produce of the soil but the exportation of manufactures and services".

Summary of Theme 1 Findings: The historical-structural perspective reveals that Nigeria's development challenges are not merely the result of policy failures or leadership deficits but are rooted in fundamental structural flaws in the creation and organisation of the Nigerian state. The 1914 amalgamation created a deeply divided society; military rule distorted governance institutions and constitutional arrangements; and the oil economy created perverse incentives that have perpetuated dependence and corruption. These structural factors set the stage for the governance failures and institutional weaknesses examined in subsequent themes.

Theme 2: Elite Capture, Corruption, and Governance Failure

A dominant theme across the reviewed literature is the role of elite behaviour, corruption, and governance failures in perpetuating Nigeria's development stagnation. The concept of "elite capture"—the systematic appropriation of state resources and institutions by a small ruling class for personal enrichment—features prominently in the analysis. **Corruption as a Systemic Feature:** Omoyeni, Omotayo, and Onuoha (2025) examine "the intricate relationship between governance failures and their implications for sustainable development in Nigeria," identifying "elite greed at various levels of government" as a primary driver of developmental stagnation.

The study argues that "the true victims of Nigeria's governance crises are the everyday citizens, who bear the brunt of mismanagement, poor policy decisions, and systemic corruption". The systematic review of governance and corruption in Nigeria reveals that corruption is not merely an individual failing but a systemic feature of the political economy. Corruption is embedded in the structure of opportunities and incentives facing political elites, where control of state resources provides access to immense wealth with limited accountability. The "rentier" nature of the Nigerian state—where revenue derives primarily from oil extraction rather than productive activity—creates a political economy in which competition for state resources, rather than productive enterprise, is the primary route to accumulation.

Elitism, Ethnicity, and Power: Akinyele, Omobowale, Akanle, and Busari (2025) examine the "comingling effects of elitism, ethnicity, and development in Nigeria," arguing that "few works exist on the comingling effects of elitism, ethnicity, and development in Nigeria" and that "related studies focus largely on ethnicity within primordial and cultural constructs, with little attention to the role of the elites in employing, negotiating, and at times manipulating colonial-era ethnic identity constructs and allegiances to secure and preserve access and power". This analysis reveals that ethnic identity in Nigeria is not simply a cultural inheritance but is actively constructed and manipulated by political elites to secure access to resources and power. Elites "employ, negotiate, and at times manipulate colonial-era ethnic identity constructs and allegiances to secure and preserve access and power". The persistence of Nigeria's rampant inequality, widespread poverty, and chronic underdevelopment is thus linked to the strategic deployment of ethnic identity by elites to maintain their privileged position.

Leadership and Governance Quality

Sule and Ishaq (2025) examine the relationship between leadership, good governance, and development in Nigeria, concluding that "transformational leadership is essential for effective governance and development in Nigeria". The study employs the "wither paradigm to elucidate the internal and external factors contributing to Nigeria's backwardation," concluding that "effective leadership and governance foster development, while their absence contributes to underdevelopment". The concept of "transformational leadership" in this context refers not merely to individual leaders but to a broader orientation of governance that prioritises national development over personal enrichment and sectional interest. The absence of such leadership is identified as a critical factor in Nigeria's development stagnation.

Summary of Theme 2 Findings: The analysis of elite capture, corruption, and governance failure reveals a political economy in which a small ruling class systematically appropriates state resources for personal enrichment while manipulating ethnic identity to maintain power. Corruption is not an aberration but a systemic feature of Nigeria's political economy, reinforced by the rentier structure of the state and the strategic behaviour of political elites. The failure of transformational leadership compounds these

challenges, as successive governments have prioritised personal and sectional interests over national development.

Theme 3: Institutional Weakness and Policy Inconsistency

A third thematic cluster addresses the institutional dimensions of Nigeria's development challenges, focusing on the weakness of state institutions, policy inconsistency, and the absence of coherent long-term planning.

Weak State Capacity and Institutional Fragility

Fasan (2025) identifies "weak state capacity" as a "significant issue in Nigeria" that "hinders Nigeria's ability to manage various societal challenges, including joblessness, poverty, inequality, and insecurity". The analysis emphasises that this "isn't due to a lack of skilled individuals; Nigerians are recognised for their leadership on global stages. Instead, the root of the problem lies in ineffective governance, fragile institutions, and a deficit of visionary and competent political leadership". The fragility of Nigerian institutions is evident across multiple domains: the judiciary is subject to political interference; the civil service is characterised by patronage and inefficiency; regulatory agencies lack independence and capacity; and security institutions are unable to provide basic protection to citizens. This institutional fragility undermines policy implementation, enables corruption, and erodes public trust in government.

Policy Inconsistency and Lack of Continuity

Mbonu (2025) attributes Nigeria's "recurring economic and governance instability" to "duplicated policies, inconsistent reforms and the absence of a coherent long-term national development plan". The analysis argues that "the country's failure to sustain policies across administrations has continued to undermine growth and institutional stability, noting that frequent shifts in priorities weaken planning and execution". The pattern of policy inconsistency reflects several interconnected factors: the personalisation of policy by individual leaders, the absence of institutional memory across administrations, the incentives created by electoral competition to repudiate predecessor policies, and the weakness of civil society and oversight institutions that might enforce policy continuity. Mbonu (2025) argues that "countries which have recorded sustained development did so by committing to long-term goals, disciplined leadership and strong institutions rather than relying on personalities".

Infrastructure Deficits and Service Delivery Failures

The infrastructure deficit in Nigeria represents a particularly acute manifestation of institutional failure. A systematic review of transport and socioeconomic development found that "improved transport facilities in Nigeria positively impacted education access ($\chi^2 = 78.46$) and healthcare ($r = 0.461$, $p = 0.034$)" and that "agricultural production exhibited strong correlation ($r = 0.615$)" with transport development. However, "policy implementation which include funding and corruption" were identified as challenges that have limited infrastructure development. The power sector provides a stark illustration of infrastructure failure. A systematic review of the Nigerian power sector found that "installed capacity, at around 14 GW, is mainly from gas turbine

plants (85.5%) without carbon capture technology," and that "around 90% of the off-grid electricity in the country is produced by diesel and petrol generators, incurring high operational and environmental costs". The study noted that "it was estimated that 900 firms closed down due to the high cost of operating diesel generators, impacting the competitiveness of Nigerian-made goods in the global market in 2009". The education sector similarly reflects institutional failure. A systematic review of basic education funding found "a consistent failure to meet the UNESCO-recommended 15–20% budgetary allocation for education, with basic education often receiving marginal and delayed disbursements". Key issues identified include "dilapidated infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate teaching materials, and weak financial accountability at the state level—aggravated by the conditional requirement for counterpart funding to access federal grants".

Summary of Theme 3 Findings:

The analysis of institutional weakness and policy inconsistency reveals a state that lacks the capacity to effectively implement policies, maintain continuity across administrations, or provide basic infrastructure and services. These institutional deficits compound the governance failures examined in Theme 2, creating a vicious cycle in which elite capture and corruption further weaken institutions, while institutional weakness enables elite capture and corruption.

Theme 4: Ethnicity, Identity Politics, and National Fragmentation

The fourth thematic cluster addresses the role of ethnicity and identity politics in fragmenting national unity and impeding collective action toward development.

Ethnicity and National Identity: Fasan (2025) observes that "core ethnic identities compete with, and often trump, the national identity". This fragmentation of national identity has profound implications for development, as it undermines the social cohesion necessary for collective action, enables political elites to exploit identity divisions for personal gain, and creates zero-sum competition among ethnic groups for state resources. The persistence of ethnic identities as primary sources of political mobilisation reflects both historical factors (the creation of the Nigerian state through forced amalgamation) and contemporary dynamics (the strategic manipulation of ethnicity by political elites). The combination of these factors has created a society in which political competition is structured primarily around ethnic identity rather than around issues, policies, or ideologies.

Ethnicity, Elitism, and Manipulation

Akinyele, Omobowale, Akanle, and Busari (2025) emphasise the active role of elites in constructing and manipulating ethnic identity. The analysis argues that elites "employ, negotiate, and at times manipulate colonial-era ethnic identity constructs and allegiances to secure and preserve access and power". This manipulation of ethnicity by elites serves to obscure class-based exploitation and to legitimate the concentration of resources and power in elite hands. The strategic deployment of ethnicity by

elites operates through several mechanisms: the use of ethnic sentiment to mobilise political support; the distribution of state resources along ethnic lines; the construction of ethnic identity as a basis for political claims; and the stigmatisation of ethnic others as threats to group interests. These mechanisms perpetuate ethnic division, undermine national unity, and divert attention from the class-based exploitation that benefits elites.

Political Restructuring as a Solution

Several studies advocate political restructuring as a solution to Nigeria's identity-based fragmentation. Fasan (2025) argues that "Nigeria needs political restructuring, which must lead to an inclusive and enduring political and constitutional settlement and a new constitution that ensures that the country is governed in a pluralistic, unity-inducing and prosperity-engendering manner". The argument is that restructuring would create a governance system that accommodates Nigeria's diversity while creating incentives for national cohesion rather than ethnic fragmentation. Adams (2025) similarly calls for a "return to a regional system of government for Nigeria to witness true development," arguing that "the main reason the country had remained largely unprogressive was that it was too centralised". The proposal for restructuring involves the devolution of power to states or regions, resource control by states, state/regional policing, and economic and political autonomy.

Summary of Theme 4 Findings:

The analysis of ethnicity and identity politics reveals a society in which ethnic identities, strategically manipulated by political elites, fragment national unity and undermine collective action toward development. The absence of a shared national identity, combined with the instrumental use of ethnicity for political mobilisation, perpetuates zero-sum competition for state resources and obstructs the development of a coherent national development agenda. Political restructuring is proposed as a mechanism for accommodating diversity while creating incentives for national cohesion.

3.3 Critical Evaluation Strengths and Weaknesses of Existing Research:

The literature on Nigeria's development challenges has several notable strengths. First, there is a rich, multi-disciplinary body of scholarship that spans political science, economics, sociology, history, and development studies, providing diverse perspectives on the problem. Second, the literature includes both theoretical analyses that provide conceptual frameworks for understanding Nigeria's challenges and empirical studies that document the manifestations of underdevelopment. Third, there is growing attention to the interconnections among different factors—historical, institutional, political, and social—that perpetuate underdevelopment. However, the literature also has several limitations. First, there is limited empirical research on the mechanisms through which historical-structural factors translate into contemporary development outcomes. While there is broad agreement that the 1914 amalgamation and military rule shaped Nigeria's development trajectory, there is less empirical work

tracing the causal pathways from these historical factors to contemporary outcomes. There is limited rigorous comparative analysis of Nigeria's development challenges with those of other countries that share similar characteristics. While there are references to comparisons with other African countries, there is limited systematic comparison that would help identify factors unique to Nigeria versus broader patterns in the region. There is limited research on the perspectives and agency of ordinary Nigerians in responding to and resisting the conditions of underdevelopment. Much of the literature focuses on the behaviour of elites and the operation of institutions, with less attention to how ordinary citizens experience, respond to, and challenge the conditions of underdevelopment. There is limited rigorous evaluation of reform initiatives and policy interventions. While there are numerous reform proposals, there is limited evidence on what works and why, limiting the ability to translate analysis into effective policy.

Areas of Agreement and Disagreement:

There is broad scholarly agreement on several key points: (1) Nigeria's underdevelopment is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon with deep historical roots; (2) elite capture and corruption are central drivers of development stagnation; (3) institutional weakness undermines policy implementation and service delivery; and (4) ethnic identity and identity politics fragment national unity and obstruct collective action. However, there are areas of disagreement and debate. First, there is disagreement about the primary driver of Nigeria's underdevelopment—whether it is historical-structural factors, elite behaviour, institutional weakness, or some combination of these. Second, there is debate about the appropriate solution—whether political restructuring, institutional reform, leadership change, or some combination is most critical. Third, there is disagreement about whether Nigeria's challenges are unique or representative of broader patterns in post-colonial Africa.

Section 4: Discussion Summary of Main Findings

This systematic literature review has examined the question of why Nigeria remains unprogressive as a nation, sixty-four years after independence. The synthesis of 37 studies reveals that Nigeria's development stagnation is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be explained by any single factor but rather results from the interaction of multiple factors operating at different levels—historical, institutional, political, economic, and socio-cultural. The review identifies four interconnected thematic clusters that together explain Nigeria's unprogressive trajectory: (1) Historical and structural foundations, including the 1914 amalgamation, military rule, and constitutional distortions; (2) Elite capture, corruption, and governance failure, driven by a rentier political economy and the strategic manipulation of ethnic identity; (3) Institutional weakness and policy inconsistency, characterised by weak state capacity, policy instability, and infrastructure deficits; and (4) Ethnicity, identity politics, and national fragmentation, which undermine social cohesion and

collective action. The key finding is that Nigeria's unprogressive condition stems from a fundamental misalignment of political structures, governance practices, and national values. The structural foundations of the Nigerian state, created through forced amalgamation and shaped by military rule, have created incentives and opportunities for elite capture and corruption, which have in turn weakened institutions and undermined policy coherence. The strategic manipulation of ethnic identity by elites has fragmented national unity and obstructed the development of a shared national development agenda. These factors operate synergistically to perpetuate a cycle of stagnation that resists piecemeal reform.

4.2 Contribution to the Existing Body of Knowledge

This review contributes to the existing body of knowledge in several ways. First, it provides a comprehensive synthesis of scholarship across multiple disciplines, integrating historical, political, economic, institutional, and socio-cultural perspectives on Nigeria's development challenges. By bringing together insights from these diverse perspectives, the review illuminates the interconnections among factors that are often treated separately in the literature. The review identifies the structural, institutional, and political mechanisms through which historical factors—particularly the 1914 amalgamation and military rule—have shaped contemporary development outcomes. While the historical-structural perspective is not novel, this review traces the causal pathways more systematically than previous work. The review highlights the strategic manipulation of ethnic identity by political elites as a mechanism that perpetuates both elite capture and national fragmentation. By emphasising the active role of elites in constructing and deploying ethnic identity, the review contributes to understanding how ethnicity and class intersect in Nigeria's political economy. The review provides a systematic assessment of the quality and contribution of different types of research on Nigeria's development challenges, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and areas for future research.

4.3 Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this review are broadly consistent with previous scholarship on Nigeria's development challenges. Scholars have long recognised the significance of the 1914 amalgamation, military rule, corruption, elite behaviour, institutional weakness, and ethnic identity in shaping Nigeria's development trajectory. The review confirms the continued relevance of these factors and provides evidence of their persistence and interaction. However, the review also extends and refines previous scholarship in several ways. First, it emphasises the synergistic interaction among factors that are often treated separately, arguing that Nigeria's underdevelopment results from the combination and interaction of factors rather than any single factor alone. Second, it highlights the strategic manipulation of ethnicity by elites as a mechanism that links elite capture and national fragmentation. Third, it identifies policy inconsistency and institutional weakness as critical factors that perpetuate stagnation and undermine reform efforts. The review also engages with contemporary debates about Nigeria's development challenges, including debates about political restructuring, constitutional reform, and the role of leadership.

While previous studies have addressed these topics, the review provides a systematic synthesis of the arguments and evidence, contributing to informed policy discussion.

4.4 Practical Implications and Potential Applications

The findings of this review have several practical implications for policy and practice. First, the identification of structural-structural factors as fundamental causes of Nigeria's underdevelopment suggests that piecemeal, technical reforms are unlikely to produce significant improvement. Meaningful progress requires addressing the structural foundations of Nigeria's development challenges, including the constitutional and political architecture of the state. The emphasis on elite capture and corruption as drivers of development stagnation highlights the need for institutional reforms that constrain elite behaviour and enhance accountability. These reforms might include strengthening oversight institutions, enhancing transparency and disclosure, protecting whistleblowers, and creating incentives for accountability. The identification of institutional weakness as a critical factor suggests the need for systematic institutional strengthening, including civil service reform, judicial reform, and capacity-building in regulatory agencies. Institutional strengthening must address both the formal rules and procedures and the informal norms and practices that shape institutional behaviour. The recognition of policy inconsistency as a barrier to development suggests the need for mechanisms that enhance policy continuity across administrations, including the development of long-term national development plans, institutionalisation of policy processes, and creation of professional civil service that transcends political transitions. The analysis of ethnicity and identity politics suggests the need for policies that foster national cohesion while accommodating diversity. These policies might include education and civic engagement programmes that promote national identity, constitutional and political reforms that ensure equitable representation and resource allocation, and mechanisms for conflict resolution and dialogue across ethnic lines.

4.5 Limitations of the Research

This systematic literature review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The review is limited to literature published in English, which may exclude relevant scholarship published in other languages. While English is the primary language of academic publication in Nigeria, some relevant research may have been published in other languages. The review focuses on literature published between 2015 and 2026, with exceptions for foundational historical works. This time frame was chosen to capture contemporary perspectives while acknowledging the historical depth of the literature. However, it may have excluded relevant studies published before 2015 that could have contributed to the analysis. The review is limited to studies where Nigeria is the primary unit of analysis. While this focus was necessary to maintain a coherent scope, it may have excluded comparative studies that could have provided valuable insights into Nigeria's development challenges through comparison with other countries. The review's primary focus on explaining Nigeria's unprogressiveness means that it pays less attention to the agency of

ordinary Nigerians in responding to and challenging the conditions of underdevelopment. While this focus was necessary to address the research question, it may have limited the study's ability to capture the full complexity of Nigeria's development dynamics. The reliance on secondary sources—published scholarship and reports—means that the review is dependent on the quality and completeness of the existing literature. While systematic review methodology provides tools for assessing study quality, it cannot compensate for gaps or limitations in the literature itself.

4.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this review, several directions for future research can be identified. First, there is a need for more rigorous empirical research on the mechanisms through which historical-structural factors translate into contemporary development outcomes. While there is broad agreement that factors like the 1914 amalgamation and military rule shaped Nigeria's trajectory, there is limited empirical work tracing the causal pathways from these historical factors to contemporary outcomes. There is a need for more systematic comparative analysis of Nigeria's development challenges with those of other countries that share similar characteristics. Such analysis would help identify factors unique to Nigeria versus broader patterns in the region and would provide lessons for reform from other contexts. The need for more research on the perspectives and agency of ordinary Nigerians in responding to and resisting the conditions of underdevelopment. Understanding how citizens experience, respond to, and challenge underdevelopment is essential for developing effective and legitimate reform strategies. There is a need for rigorous evaluation of reform initiatives and policy interventions. While there are numerous proposals for reform, there is limited evidence on what works and why, limiting the ability to translate analysis into effective policy. Need for more interdisciplinary and multi-method research that integrates insights from different disciplines and employs diverse methodological approaches. The complex, multifaceted nature of Nigeria's development challenges requires research that can capture both the macro-level structural factors and the micro-level dynamics of behaviour and interaction.

Section 5: Conclusions, and summary of Important Aspects of the Literature

The systematic literature review of why Nigeria remains unprogressive as a nation reveals a rich and extensive body of scholarship that spans multiple disciplines and methodological approaches. The literature consistently identifies four interconnected sets of factors—historical-structural, political-economic, institutional, and socio-cultural—that together explain Nigeria's development stagnation. The historical-structural perspective emphasises the foundational role of the 1914 amalgamation, military rule, and constitutional distortions in creating a state that is structurally ill-suited to fostering development. The political-economic perspective highlights the role of elite capture, corruption, and the rentier economy in creating incentives that prioritise elite enrichment over national

development. The institutional perspective identifies weak state capacity, policy inconsistency, and infrastructure deficits as mechanisms through which governance failures translate into development outcomes. The socio-cultural perspective points to ethnicity, identity politics, and national fragmentation as factors that undermine social cohesion and obstruct collective action. The literature is characterised by broad agreement on the significance of these factors and their interaction, though there are areas of debate about their relative importance and the appropriate solutions. The literature has evolved over time, with contemporary scholarship offering more nuanced and integrated analyses than earlier work.

5.2 Evaluation of the Current State of the Literature

The current state of the literature on Nigeria's development challenges is robust and growing, with a substantial body of high-quality scholarship across multiple disciplines. The literature has moved beyond simplistic explanations of corruption or bad leadership to offer more sophisticated analyses of the structural, institutional, and political factors that perpetuate underdevelopment. However, the literature also has significant gaps and limitations. There is limited rigorous empirical research on the mechanisms through which historical-structural factors translate into contemporary outcomes; limited systematic comparative analysis with other contexts; limited research on the perspectives and agency of ordinary citizens; and limited rigorous evaluation of reform initiatives. There is also a gap between scholarly analysis and policy practice. While scholars have provided extensive analysis of Nigeria's development challenges and proposed numerous reforms, there is limited evidence of these analyses and proposals influencing policy. Bridging the gap between research and policy is a critical challenge for the scholarly community.

5.3 Identification of Significant Flaws or Gaps in Existing Knowledge

Several significant gaps in existing knowledge can be identified from this review. First, there is a limited understanding of the mechanisms through which elite behaviour is constrained or enabled by institutional arrangements. While the literature identifies elite capture and corruption as central problems, there is limited empirical research on how institutional design, enforcement mechanisms, and accountability systems might constrain elite behaviour more effectively. There is limited understanding of why some reform initiatives succeed and others fail. While there are numerous proposals for reform, there is limited evidence on the conditions under which reforms are likely to be adopted, implemented effectively, and produce intended outcomes. There is limited understanding of the role of civil society in Nigeria's development dynamics. While some work has addressed civil society, there is limited systematic analysis of how civil society organisations influence governance, accountability, and development outcomes. There is limited understanding of regional variations within Nigeria. Much of the literature addresses Nigeria as a national unit, with limited attention to how development challenges and outcomes vary across states, regions, and localities.

There is a limited understanding of the relationship between Nigeria's development challenges and broader regional and global dynamics. While Nigeria's challenges are shaped by its position in the global economy and its relationships with other states, these external factors receive limited attention in the literature.

5.4 Outline of Areas for Future Study

Based on the identified gaps, several areas for future study can be outlined. First, future research should examine the mechanisms through which institutional design might effectively constrain elite behaviour and enhance accountability. This research might employ comparative analysis of institutions across different sectors and levels of government, or might use experimental or quasi-experimental methods to evaluate the effects of institutional reforms. Second, future research should examine the conditions under which reform initiatives succeed or fail. This research might employ case study methodology to trace the implementation of specific reforms, or might use comparative analysis to identify factors associated with reform success. Third, future research should examine the role of civil society in Nigeria's development dynamics, including how civil society organisations influence governance, accountability, and development outcomes. Fourth, future research should examine regional variations within Nigeria, including how development challenges and outcomes vary across states, regions, and localities. Fifth, future research should examine the relationship between Nigeria's development challenges and broader regional and global dynamics, including how Nigeria's position in the global economy and its relationships with other states shape its development trajectory.

5.5 Linkage to Existing Knowledge:

This review builds on and extends existing knowledge by synthesising scholarship across multiple disciplines, identifying interconnections among factors that are often treated separately, tracing causal pathways from historical-structural factors to contemporary outcomes, and providing a systematic assessment of the quality and contribution of different types of research. The review confirms the continued relevance of established explanatory factors—the 1914 amalgamation, military rule, corruption, elite behaviour, institutional weakness, and ethnic identity—while extending and refining the analysis in several ways. It emphasises the synergistic interaction among factors, highlights the strategic manipulation of ethnicity by elites, and identifies policy inconsistency as a critical factor in perpetuating stagnation.

5.6 Conclusions Drawn from Main Points and Their Implications

Several conclusions can be drawn from the main points that have emerged in this review. Nigeria's unprogressive condition is not the result of resource scarcity, geographic disadvantage, or cultural inadequacy. Rather, it is the product of a particular history, political economy, and set of institutional arrangements that have created incentives and opportunities for elite capture and corruption while undermining collective action toward national development. The persistence of Nigeria's development challenges despite numerous reform efforts suggests that piecemeal, technical reforms are unlikely to produce significant improvement.

Meaningful progress requires addressing the fundamental structural and institutional factors that perpetuate stagnation. Political restructuring and constitutional reform are likely necessary conditions for sustainable development, as the current governance architecture creates incentives and opportunities for elite capture while failing to accommodate Nigeria's diversity in ways that foster national cohesion. Institutional strengthening and accountability reform are necessary complements to political restructuring, as even a reformed governance architecture will fail to produce development outcomes without effective institutions and accountability mechanisms. Fostering national cohesion requires policies that accommodate diversity while promoting a shared sense of national identity and purpose. Such policies must address the strategic manipulation of ethnicity by elites and create incentives for collective action toward national development. The transformation of Nigeria from its current condition of stagnation to a more progressive trajectory is possible but requires sustained commitment, comprehensive reform, and collective action. It is not beyond human ingenuity and creativity to produce for a country an enduring political and constitutional settlement and create a fit-for-purpose economic and governance structure. However, it requires acting in the national interest to do so—putting the best interests of the nation and its people above sectional and myopic considerations. The implications of these conclusions are significant for policy and practice. Nigeria's development challenges cannot be addressed through piecemeal reforms or technical fixes; they require fundamental restructuring of the political and institutional architecture. Such restructuring requires broad-based consensus, sustained commitment, and collective action across ethnic, regional, and political divisions. While the challenges are daunting, the alternative—continued stagnation and potential fragmentation—is more daunting still.

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