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THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP FAILURE AND ECONOMIC MISMANAGEMENT ON UNEMPLOYMENT AND INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA (1999–2023)

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Abstract
Since the inception of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, successive administrations have struggled with profound economic challenges, primarily driven by leadership deficits and governance inefficiencies. This study critically examines the intricate relationship between leadership failures and economic mismanagement in Nigeria, with a particular focus on unemployment and socio-economic inequality from 1999 to 2023. Grounded in Good Governance Theory, the research explores systemic governance failures that have hindered Nigeria's economic progress. The theory underscores the significance of effective leadership, sound economic management, and accountable governance as essential pillars of sustainable development. It further illustrates how governance deficiencies-manifested in corruption, institutional weakness, and resource mismanagement-aggravate socio-economic issues such as unemployment and inequality. This study is based on an extensive review of secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journals, and credible web-based materials, providing a strong foundation for analyzing the factors shaping Nigeria's economic trajectory. The findings indicate that inconsistent policy frameworks, pervasive corruption, and a persistent lack of visionary leadership have obstructed efforts to achieve inclusive growth and equitable development. The study concludes by advocating for targeted reforms in Nigeria's economic governance structures, emphasizing the urgent need for transformative leadership and institutional restructuring. Without these reforms, the deep-seated socio-economic challenges impeding sustainable development will persist, reinforcing the nation's cycle of underdevelopment.

Key Words: Corruption, Governance, Inequality, Leadership, and Unemployment.

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Introduction

Nigeria, endowed with abundant natural resources and a youthful population, stands as Africa's most populous nation and a major economy. However, beneath this promising facade lies a troubling reality. Despite its vast potential, Nigeria faces persistent challenges, including rising unemployment and deep socio-economic inequalities, which significantly hinder its development. Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, economic growth has been largely driven by oil revenues. Yet, this growth has been uneven, benefiting a privileged few while leaving the majority in economic hardship. This paradox-a resource-rich nation struggling with widespread economic discontent-necessitates a critical assessment of leadership, governance structures, and economic management throughout Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

At the core of Nigeria's developmental struggles are leadership failures and economic mismanagement. Scholars such as Akeem and Olayemi (2020) argue that governance inefficiencies, policy instability, and entrenched rent-seeking practices have weakened the state's ability to promote inclusive economic growth, reduce inequalities, and create sustainable employment opportunities. Leadership deficiencies, particularly the inability to implement effective economic reforms, have contributed to corruption and inefficiencies in critical sectors like agriculture and manufacturing. This deterioration has intensified socio-economic vulnerabilities (Ogunbiyi, 2021; Yusufu, Idrees, &Ogaji, 2022). Additionally, Ekhator (2019) highlights Nigeria's over-reliance on oil exports, fiscal mismanagement, and lack of economic diversification as key factors driving the country's uneven growth and structural imbalances.

The consequences of oil dependency are extensive. Dike (2014) argues that the dominance of oil has led to the neglect of education, poor leadership, corruption, and flawed economic policies. He stresses the need for investment in human capital, infrastructure, and institutional reforms as essential drivers of national progress. Despite repeated political promises to address these areas, inadequate funding and weak implementation continue to hinder meaningful reforms. Nigeria's long-term industrialization prospects, Dike asserts, depend on sustained investments in education, health, governance, and technological advancement.

Compounding these challenges is a historical pattern of moral and ethical deficits among Nigeria's political elite, as noted by Okoli and Igbini (2020). These deficiencies have obstructed economic progress, exacerbated unemployment and deepening socio-economic divides. Corruption has further weakened governance, diverting public resources from infrastructure and social programs, widening the gap between the wealthy and the economically marginalized (Obi & Olumide, 2021). The top 10% of the population now controls over half of the nation's wealth, amplifying economic exclusion (NBS, 2023).

This study critically examines the extent to which leadership failures and economic mismanagement have fueled unemployment and inequality in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023. Using Good Governance Theory, it explores governance failures, corruption, and policy inefficiencies, analyzing their socio-economic consequences and the enduring cycles of exclusion that define Nigeria's political economy.

Literature Review

This section is divided into two subsections: the conceptual review and the empirical review.

Conceptual Review

Leadership failure: Leadership failure in Nigeria reflects the inability of political leaders to fulfill their responsibilities effectively. It manifests in a lack of accountability, transparency, and ethical governance, often resulting in corruption, nepotism, and inefficiency in public service delivery. These governance deficits have eroded public trust, weakened policy implementation, and intensified socio-economic challenges. Okoli and Igbini (2020) trace Nigeria's leadership crisis to dysfunctional governance patterns inherited from prolonged military rule. Many leaders exhibit apathy, self-interest, incompetence, and a disregard for national development. This absence of visionary leadership has stifled economic progress and hindered sustainable development.

Economic mismanagement: Economic mismanagement in Nigeria is marked by flawed economic policies, poor resource allocation, and a failure to implement sustainable development strategies. Over-reliance on oil revenues has diverted investment from critical sectors like agriculture and manufacturing, creating economic vulnerabilities. Mismanagement has led to inflation, unemployment, and economic stagnation, as public funds are often misallocated or lost to corruption. Ugoani (2017) notes that widespread mismanagement and corruption contributed to Nigeria's economic recession in the 1980s, marked by high unemployment and economic instability. The failure of 85% of major reform programs between 1960 and 2000 underscores the detrimental impact of governance deficits. Sustainable economic progress remains unattainable in an environment lacking integrity, transparency, and accountability.

Unemployment: Unemployment in Nigeria remains a persistent challenge, particularly among the youth, due to leadership failures and ineffective job creation strategies. It is categorized into cyclical, structural, and frictional unemployment, all of which negatively impact economic stability and social cohesion. Bello, Yahaya, and Adamu (2024) reference the International Labor Organization (ILO), defining unemployment based on three criteria: being without work, being available for work, and actively seeking employment. Despite Nigeria's large workforce, job opportunities remain insufficient, further deepening economic hardship and social unrest.

Inequality: Inequality in Nigeria is driven by disparities in wealth distribution, access to education, and employment opportunities. Leadership and governance failures have concentrated wealth within the political elite while marginalizing large segments of the population. This unequal distribution of resources hampers social stability and economic growth. Adekunle (2023) argues that rising socio-economic inequality threatens national development, fostering frustration and social fragmentation. The prevalence of deprivation and malnutrition among the lower classes undermines nation-building efforts, obstructing sustainable progress.

Empirical Review

Okoli and Igbini (2020) examine the link between leadership failure and youth unemployment in Nigeria. Using a cross-sectional design, they surveyed 300 respondents from the South-South geopolitical zone, employing a non-probability sampling technique. Data analysis, conducted through correlation and linear regression using SPSS version 21, revealed a significant relationship between governance inefficiencies and youth unemployment. The study concludes that ineffective leadership exacerbates unemployment and calls for comprehensive youth empowerment initiatives. The authors recommend that government agencies implement programs fostering self-employment and entrepreneurship while revitalizing agricultural

initiatives to generate job opportunities. Additionally, they stress that meaningful youth empowerment requires a strong commitment to anti-corruption efforts.

Nweke (2018) highlights the paradox of Nigeria's abundant resources coexisting with widespread poverty decades after independence. This quantitative study assesses leadership effectiveness in fostering development and good governance. Utilizing primary data from Afrobarometer surveys (1999–2016) alongside secondary sources from institutions such as Transparency International and the World Bank, the study applies descriptive statistics and regression analysis. Findings indicate that self-serving leadership, ineffective governance, economic mismanagement, and corruption have eroded public trust. The study suggests reforming leadership recruitment processes to address corruption and enhance developmental outcomes. Ultimately, it provides policymakers with strategies for strengthening leadership capabilities in Nigeria.

Okorie and Anowor (2017) explore the intricate relationship between unemployment and poverty, contributing to the empirical discourse in development economics. Drawing from secondary data spanning 1980–2015, they analyze key socio-economic indicators using trend graph analysis, correlation coefficients, and Granger causality tests. Results indicate a statistically significant positive correlation between unemployment and poverty, with causality tests confirming that unemployment drives poverty in Nigeria. The study's Error Correction Mechanism (ECM) analysis suggests that while short-term economic imbalances persist, long-term equilibrium is attainable, albeit with a slow adjustment rate of 6%. Given these findings, the authors advocate for targeted policy interventions to reduce unemployment, thereby alleviating poverty.

Okolie, Onyema, and Bassey (2019) investigate the correlation between poverty and insecurity in Nigeria, employing a descriptive research design with data from 600 respondents selected through non-probabilistic sampling. Grounded in frustration-aggression theory, the study applies correlation and linear regression analysis using SPSS version 21. Findings reveal a strong positive correlation between poverty and insecurity ($r = 0.783$), with poverty exerting a statistically significant impact on insecurity ($R^2 = 0.716$). Based on these results, the authors recommend that Nigerian authorities at all levels prioritize citizens' welfare by addressing fundamental socio-economic needs.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Good Governance Theory (GGT) as its analytical framework. The theory emerged through the concerted efforts of international organizations, scholars, and policymakers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The World Bank's seminal 1989 report, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, played a pivotal role in mainstreaming the concept by underscoring the imperative of transparency, accountability, and effective governance as foundational to sustainable development. Subsequent contributions from institutions such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), alongside scholarship in development studies and political science, have further refined the theoretical construct, particularly within the context of the Global South. GGT thus serves as a critical lens for examining the intricate nexus between governance practices, economic development, and societal well-being.

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Theoretical Application

The key principles of GGT-accountability, rule of law, transparency, participation, responsiveness, equity, efficiency, and consensus orientation-highlight governance failures that have contributed to Nigeria's socio-economic challenges.

Accountability: Nigerian leadership has consistently demonstrated a lack of accountability, fostering corruption, impunity, and self-serving governance. Since 1999, successive administrations have mismanaged public resources, leading to inadequate service delivery, rent-seeking behavior, and ineffective economic reforms.

Rule of Law: Weak enforcement of legal frameworks has allowed corruption and economic crimes to thrive, disproportionately benefiting elites while exacerbating socio-economic disparities. The failure to uphold justice and curb illicit financial practices has deepened structural inequalities.

Transparency: Governance in Nigeria has been characterized by opacity, with restricted access to public financial data and decision-making processes. This lack of transparency has contributed to economic mismanagement, inefficient resource allocation, and widening inequality.

Participation: Effective governance necessitates inclusive participation, yet Nigerian policymaking remains centralized among elites. The exclusion of marginalized populations from decision-making has intensified unemployment and economic disparities, limiting opportunities for social and economic advancement.

Responsiveness: Nigerian governments have struggled to address socio-economic challenges effectively. Policy disconnects, weak implementation, and inefficiencies have contributed to rising unemployment and growing economic inequalities, highlighting governance failures in meeting public needs.

Equity and Inclusiveness: Public resources and economic opportunities are disproportionately allocated to political elites and influential groups, reinforcing systemic inequalities. Marginalized communities remain excluded from economic benefits, perpetuating socio-economic imbalances.

Effectiveness and Efficiency: Economic mismanagement is evident in Nigeria's inefficient resource allocation, excessive government spending on unproductive projects, and weak fiscal discipline. These inefficiencies have stifled economic growth and contributed to rising unemployment.

Consensus Orientation: The absence of broad-based consensus in Nigerian policymaking has resulted in fragmented policies and governance conflicts. Political rivalries and vested interests obstruct cohesive economic strategies, undermining sustainable development.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology, utilizing secondary data from academic books, peer-reviewed journals, and reliable online sources to investigate economic governance in Nigeria. Through systematic content analysis, it explores leadership practices, economic

management, and governance structures in the Fourth Republic (1999–2023), focusing on their impact on unemployment and inequality**.**

Results and Discussion

Impacts of Leadership Failure and Economic Mismanagement on Unemployment in Nigeria (1999–2023)

The relationship between leadership failure and economic mismanagement has critically influenced unemployment rates in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023. Research indicates that ineffective governance and policy inconsistencies have obstructed economic growth, thereby limiting job creation. Achebe (1983) identifies leadership as Nigeria's "primary challenge," asserting that self-serving governance has continually undermined national development. Ogundiya (2010) supports this view, highlighting the detrimental effects of corruption and nepotism on sustainable employment opportunities.

Economic mismanagement, particularly the reliance on oil revenue and insufficient economic diversification, has exacerbated the unemployment crisis. Nigeria's extensive natural resources have not translated into widespread job creation due to the misallocation of oil revenues, which has hindered investment in vital sectors like agriculture and manufacturing (Okonjo-Iweala, 2012). This over-dependence on oil has made Nigeria vulnerable to global economic fluctuations, evident during the oil price collapses of 2008 and 2015, which led to significant job losses (Omotola, 2008). Recent data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) reveals that unemployment rates surged to approximately 40% in 2023, reflecting the ongoing challenges associated with economic mismanagement.

Additionally, inadequate infrastructure development-a direct consequence of poor fiscal discipline-has stifled job creation. Salami (2018) notes that Nigeria's budget prioritizes recurrent expenditures over capital projects, limiting investments necessary for economic growth. This underfunding has resulted in low productivity and competitiveness, further restricting job opportunities. Furthermore, a report by the World Bank (2021) indicates that Nigeria's infrastructure deficits have cost the economy an estimated $2.3 trillion, underscoring the urgent need for investment in critical infrastructure to facilitate job creation.

The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the 1980s exemplifies the impact of economic mismanagement on employment. Obadan (2003) argues that SAP-driven neoliberal reforms, including subsidy cuts and privatization, resulted in layoffs and job insecurity. Dismantling protective policies exposed local industries to international competition, leading to further job losses (Ogun, 2010). Recent studies have shown that similar patterns of economic liberalization continue to challenge employment stability, with many local businesses unable to compete effectively.

Corruption exacerbates the link between leadership failure, economic mismanagement, and unemployment. Transparency International (2021) ranks Nigeria among the most corrupt countries, indicating the diversion of public funds meant for development. Rotberg (2007) argues that systemic leadership failures facilitate this corruption, undermining initiatives aimed at skill development and industrial expansion, both essential for reducing unemployment. Moreover, the education sector's mismanagement has created a "skills gap," where graduates lack the skills needed for available jobs (Olayiwola &Okodua, 2015). This underfunding

contributes to high youth unemployment rates, which reached approximately 53.4% in 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Policy inconsistency resulting from leadership changes complicates efforts to reduce unemployment. Programs like the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) were often abandoned before achieving their goals (Edo et al., 2019), eroding investor confidence and limiting sustainable job creation. Nigeria's high unemployment rate is intricately linked to leadership and economic mismanagement.

Impacts of Leadership Failure and Economic Mismanagement on Inequality in Nigeria (1999–2023)

The persistence of inequality in Nigeria since 1999 can be largely attributed to failures in leadership and economic mismanagement. Scholars such as Achebe (1983) and Ogundiya (2010) argue that Nigerian leadership has historically been characterized by policies favouring personal and elite interests over inclusive growth. This approach has fostered systemic inequalities in access to resources, education, and employment. Weak governance structures have enabled resource misallocation, concentrating wealth among the political elite rather than benefiting the broader society (Obadan, 2003; Rotberg, 2007).

Economic mismanagement, particularly fiscal indiscipline and an over-reliance on oil revenue, exacerbates inequality. Despite Nigeria's significant oil wealth, poor economic governance limits equitable resource distribution, disproportionately benefiting the elite while exacerbating poverty and income disparity among the wider population (Okonjo-Iweala, 2012; Ogun, 2010). For instance, Nigeria's budget has been heavily skewed toward recurrent expenditures, which accounted for over 70% of total spending in recent years, hindering investments in critical sectors like education, healthcare, and infrastructure, leaving rural and impoverished communities underserved (Salami, 2018; Akinyele, 2020).

Corruption, a by-product of both leadership failures and economic mismanagement, has significantly deepened inequality. According to Transparency International (2021), Nigeria ranks among the most corrupt countries, with corruption siphoning funds away from essential public services. This misallocation impacts sectors such as education, where resources are often diverted, resulting in inadequate facilities for lower-income communities and perpetuating intergenerational privilege for those who can afford private education (Ebi & Egbe, 2021). Furthermore, regional and gender disparities are exacerbated by these governance failures; the northern regions lag behind the south in development indicators, while women face restricted economic opportunities due to insufficient policy support (World Bank, 2023; Ojo & Akanbi, 2020).

Findings

Leadership Failures and Governance Issues: Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, leadership failures characterized by corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability have severely hindered economic development. Achebe (1983) and Ogundiya (2010) emphasize that these governance issues have led to resource mismanagement, weakened institutions, and ineffective development programs. Prioritizing elite interests over inclusive growth has deepened socio-economic inequalities and restricted public service access for the majority.

Economic Mismanagement and Policy Challenges: Economic mismanagement, particularly through policies like the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), has exacerbated unemployment

and inequality, as austerity measures increased joblessness (Obadan, 2003). Reliance on oil revenues without diversification has also limited job creation, making Nigeria vulnerable to global market fluctuations, as seen during the 2008 and 2015 oil price crashes (Omotola, 2008). Additionally, the focus on recurrent spending over capital investment has resulted in inadequate funding for infrastructure and stunted economic growth (Salami, 2018).

Corruption and Resource Misallocation: Corruption remains a significant barrier to socio-economic progress. Nigeria consistently ranks low on the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2022), with public funds intended for development misallocated, impacting critical sectors like education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Rotberg (2007) argues that systemic corruption hampers the government's ability to deliver essential services, further entrenching unemployment and inequality.

Unemployment and the Skills Gap: The misallocation of resources and underinvestment in human capital has resulted in high unemployment, particularly among youth, with rates exceeding 50% in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Inadequate funding of the education sector has created a skills gap, misaligning graduates' abilities with market demands, exacerbating youth unemployment (Olayiwola &Okodua, 2015). Inconsistent policies and economic mismanagement have hindered sustainable job creation, with initiatives like the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) often abandoned before achieving their goals (Edo *et al.,* 2019).

Persistent Inequality and Regional Disparities: Leadership failures and economic mismanagement have contributed to systemic inequality, with policies that favor elites and concentrate wealth, widening the gap between regions and social classes. Budget allocations favoring recurrent expenditures over investments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure have entrenched inequality, especially in northern Nigeria, where development indicators lag and regional disparities persist (World Bank, 2023). Additionally, gender-based inequality is exacerbated by limited policy support for women's economic opportunities, restricting upward mobility.

Lack of Effective Social Safety Nets: The absence of strong social protection policies further compounds socio-economic challenges. Despite attempts to implement social investment programs, execution problems and corruption have limited their effectiveness, leaving low-income households vulnerable (Olayiwola &Okodua, 2015). Without effective safety nets, disadvantaged groups face greater difficulties overcoming economic hardships, perpetuating social inequality.

Conclusion

This study examines the relationship between leadership failure, economic mismanagement, and their adverse effects on unemployment and inequality in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023. Using Good Governance Theory, the research reveals that Nigeria’s ongoing socio-economic challenges stem from poor leadership, weak institutions, and corruption. These governance issues have stalled economic progress and exacerbated social disparities. Ineffective leadership and inconsistent policy implementation have eroded public trust and led to systemic corruption and resource misallocation. As a result, unemployment has surged, and inequality has intensified, hindering equitable growth. The findings highlight the urgent need for structural reforms in Nigeria’s leadership and governance systems. Without transformative leadership and institutional reforms, Nigeria faces the risk of prolonged economic stagnation and increasing

social fragmentation. The study underscores that effective governance-marked by transparency, accountability, and sound economic management-is crucial to reversing these negative trends and achieving sustainable development. Addressing these governance challenges is vital for improving the livelihoods of Nigeria's citizens and breaking the cycle of underdevelopment that has defined the country's post-1999 trajectory.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the persistent leadership failures and economic mismanagement that have contributed to unemployment and socio-economic inequality in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023:

1. **Institutional Reform and Strengthening**: It is crucial to reform and strengthen Nigeria's institutions to ensure accountability, transparency, and efficiency. Stronger institutions are necessary to combat corruption, improve policy implementation, and manage public resources effectively.
2. **Enhancing Leadership Accountability**: Nigeria's political leadership must be held accountable for their actions through adherence to constitutional provisions and enhanced monitoring mechanisms. Strengthening anti-corruption agencies and ensuring judicial independence will improve accountability at all levels of government.
3. **Policy Consistency and Long-Term Planning**: The government should prioritize developing consistent, long-term economic policies. Frequent policy shifts hinder sustainable growth. Evidence-based policies should address structural challenges, particularly related to unemployment and inequality.
4. **Promotion of Inclusive Economic Growth**: The Nigerian government should implement policies that foster inclusive economic growth, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing, and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). These sectors have the potential to create jobs. Investments should focus on infrastructure development, access to finance, and entrepreneurship.
5. **Improvement in Public Financial Management**: Transparent and efficient public financial management is critical. The government should adopt fiscal discipline, improve revenue collection systems, and eliminate wasteful expenditures. Effective public fund management will address social and economic challenges.
6. **Capacity Building and Leadership Development**: Efforts should be made to develop future leaders through capacity-building programs, focusing on ethical leadership, strategic management, and policymaking to create a new generation of leaders committed to national development.
7. **Civic Participation and Engagement**: Enhancing civic participation in governance processes is essential. Encouraging citizens' involvement in decision-making will improve accountability and ensure that policies reflect the needs of the population. Strengthening civil society organizations and providing platforms for public discourse will foster more responsive governance.

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