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Militating Factors and Strategic Pathways for Nigeria's Socio-Economic Development in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Nigeria's quest for socio-economic development remains constrained by persistent structural, institutional, and policy-related challenges. Despite abundant human and natural resources, the country continues to grapple with factors such as weak governance, corruption, political instability, insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, poor policy implementation, and overdependence on external economies. These militating factors have collectively hindered Nigeria's ability to achieve sustainable development outcomes in critical areas such as income distribution, employment generation, education, healthcare, technological innovation, and industrialisation. Anchored on the national interest, dependency, and game theories, this study interrogates the impediments that obstruct Nigeria's development trajectory and identifies practical strategies to address them. Employing a qualitative research design, with reliance on both primary and secondary sources, the research adopts a historical and descriptive approach to provide an in-depth analysis of these developmental constraints. Findings reveal that the entrenchment of corruption, policy inconsistency, insecurity, and weak institutions are central barriers that perpetuate socio-economic stagnation. However, the study also highlights feasible pathways for transformation, including the institutionalisation of good governance practices, strengthening of policy frameworks, diversification of the economy beyond oil,

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investment in human capital development, and the adoption of technology-driven innovations. It was concluded that without a decisive and coordinated strategy to dismantle these militating factors, Nigeria's socio-economic aspirations will remain elusive. The study therefore recommends an integrated framework of reform-driven governance, inclusive economic policies, infrastructural renewal, and security sector reforms, aimed at repositioning the country on a sustainable development path in the 21st century.

Keywords: Foreign policy, socio-economic development, pathways, Nigeria

Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Socio-economic development is a multidimensional process that involves improvements in income distribution, employment generation, health outcomes, education, infrastructure, technological advancement, and social stability (Todaro & Smith, 2015). For developing nations, it is often pursued as a pathway out of poverty and inequality. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and one of its largest economies, is paradoxically characterised by persistent underdevelopment despite vast natural and human resources (Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2013; World Bank, 2020). Indicators such as high poverty rates, youth unemployment, low industrial capacity, and poor access to quality healthcare and education continue to reflect the gap between potential and actual performance (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2021).

Scholars argue that Nigeria's inability to achieve socio-economic transformation is the result of complex, interrelated factors. Internally, governance failure, corruption, policy inconsistency, insecurity, and weak institutions are cited as the most significant impediments (Achebe, 1981; Ake, 1996; Ogbeyi, 2012). For instance, the country consistently ranks low on the Corruption Perceptions Index, indicating systemic weaknesses that undermine public trust and efficient resource allocation (Transparency International, 2022). Externally, Nigeria's overdependence on crude oil exports and its vulnerability to global economic shocks have entrenched a rentier economic structure that stifles diversification and long-term growth (Okonjo-Iweala & Osafo-Kwaako, 2007; Ross, 2012).

In addition to these structural challenges, insecurity has emerged as a major developmental constraint. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and banditry in the North-West have displaced millions, disrupted agricultural production, and undermined investor confidence (International Crisis Group, 2020; Ezirim, 2021). The erosion of socio-cultural values, coupled with a weak policy implementation culture, has further compounded the crisis

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of development (Nweke, 2018). Collectively, these militating factors contribute to Nigeria's paradox of "growth without development" (Iyoha & Oriakhi, 2002).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

More than sixty years after independence, Nigeria remains unable to transform its abundant endowments into tangible developmental outcomes. Persistent poverty, estimated at over 133 million multidimensionally poor people (NBS, 2022)—inadequate infrastructure, mass unemployment, corruption, and insecurity continue to dominate the developmental landscape. These militating factors weaken governance, perpetuate social inequality, and obstruct the delivery of essential services. The overreliance on oil exports leaves the economy highly vulnerable to global price fluctuations, while weak institutional frameworks inhibit effective policy execution. Against this backdrop, interrogating the factors hindering socio-economic transformation and articulating viable strategies to overcome them becomes an urgent research necessity.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This paper focuses on two central objectives:

- i. To identify the factors militating against Nigeria achieving a high level of socio-economic development.
- ii. To determine workable strategies and approaches that could improve Nigeria's socio-economic development.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its dual contribution to knowledge and policy. First, it provides an empirical synthesis of the obstacles that have hindered Nigeria's socio-economic development, thereby advancing scholarly debates on development and governance in Africa. Second, it outlines practical strategies that can guide policymakers in addressing systemic weaknesses and harnessing the country's resources for sustainable development. By situating Nigeria's experience within broader global and regional development debates, the study enriches comparative scholarship on the political economy of underdevelopment (Rodrik, 2008; Sachs, 2015). Its findings are of value to scholars and researchers as well as policymakers, development practitioners, and international partners seeking to support Nigeria's transformation in the 21st century.

2 Literature Review

The concept of socio-economic development has been widely debated within development studies. According to Todaro and Smith (2015), it encompasses not only economic growth but also improvements in welfare indicators such as health, education, employment, and infrastructure. Seers (1969) argues that the essence of development

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lies in addressing three fundamental questions: what is happening to poverty, unemployment, and inequality? In a similar vein, Sen (1999) submits that development should be seen as the expansion of human freedoms, implying that it is not limited to the accumulation of wealth but includes the ability of people to live the lives they value. In the Nigerian context, however, socio-economic development remains elusive. As Iyoha and Oriakhi (2002) observe, the paradox of “growth without development” continues to define Nigeria's trajectory, where high GDP growth rates often fail to translate into meaningful welfare improvements for the population.

Several scholars have attempted to unravel the factors militating against Nigeria's socio-economic transformation. Achebe (1981) famously asserted that the root of Nigeria's problems is simply “leadership failure”, stressing that no amount of planning or resources can yield progress without visionary leadership. Ake (1996) reinforces this position by arguing that development in Africa has been undermined by the political class, whose self-serving interests subvert genuine economic progress. In the same line, Ogbeidi (2012) opines that corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigeria's polity, diverting public resources away from developmental projects and eroding public trust in institutions. Transparency International (2022) further corroborates this by ranking Nigeria among the most corrupt countries globally, with direct implications for governance and service delivery.

Other studies have highlighted the structural dependency of the Nigerian economy as a major obstacle. Ross (2012) submits that resource dependence, particularly on crude oil, creates rentier states where revenues from extractive industries weaken accountability and discourage economic diversification. Okonjo-Iweala and Osafo-Kwaako (2007) argue that this dependence exposes Nigeria to global oil price fluctuations, creating fiscal instability and undermining long-term planning. Sala-i-Martin and Subramanian (2013) further contend that the so-called “resource curse” has not only entrenched inequality but also stifled industrialisation, leaving the country dependent on imports for basic goods.

Insecurity has also been singled out as a critical barrier to development. The International Crisis Group (2020) documents how the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast has displaced millions, destroyed infrastructure, and disrupted education and agriculture. Ezirim (2021) agrees, adding that the expansion of banditry in the North-West and farmer–herder conflicts in the Middle Belt have worsened food insecurity and undermined investor confidence. Okoli and Lenshie (2018) also submit that the proliferation of violent conflicts in Nigeria not only weakens the economy but also threatens the very fabric of social cohesion.

Beyond insecurity, infrastructural deficits remain a major impediment to growth. Eberhard et al. (2011) note that inadequate electricity supply, poor road networks, and dilapidated public services severely limit productivity and industrial competitiveness. Nweke (2018) opines that Nigeria's infrastructural crisis is

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symptomatic of weak institutions and poor implementation capacity. Akinola (2010) similarly argues that the lack of institutionalised governance frameworks has resulted in repeated policy failures, where developmental blueprints are often abandoned before yielding results. Falola and Heaton (2008) remind us that socio-cultural divisions and rapid population growth, now surpassing 200 million, exacerbate the strain on limited resources, fuelling unemployment and inequality.

In response to these challenges, scholars have suggested strategic pathways that could reposition Nigeria on a sustainable development trajectory. North (1990) emphasises the primacy of institutions, contending that strong institutions underpin long-term growth by providing stability, enforcing contracts, and ensuring accountability. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) reinforce this by distinguishing between inclusive institutions, which foster innovation and growth, and extractive ones, which perpetuate stagnation—a distinction that is highly relevant to Nigeria's case. Kew (2010) and Ojo (2014) further argue that deepening democracy, strengthening the judiciary, and decentralising governance are necessary steps towards enhancing policy credibility.

Economic diversification is another widely discussed strategy. Rodrik (2008) submits that developing countries must diversify beyond primary commodities if they are to achieve resilience in the global economy. Sachs (2015) also argues for industrialisation as a catalyst for job creation and poverty reduction. Adegbite (2020) emphasised the potential of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in fostering inclusive growth, while Osoba (1999) underscores the importance of entrepreneurship in driving structural transformation.

Equally, investment in human capital is seen as central to sustainable development. Becker (1993) argues that education and skills development enhance productivity and innovation, while Barro (2013) provides empirical evidence that countries with higher educational attainment experience faster economic growth. Okolie (2017) notes that Nigeria's underinvestment in education and vocational training has limited its ability to harness its large youth population for development.

The role of security sector reforms cannot be overlooked. Campbell and Harwood (2018) contend that Nigeria's security challenges require not only military responses but also community-based approaches, intelligence reforms, and regional cooperation. Adebajo (2008) adds that Nigeria must strengthen its role in regional security to ensure stability that supports domestic growth.

Finally, harnessing technology and the opportunities of globalisation presents another strategic pathway. Stiglitz (2007) argues that globalisation, when managed prudently, can provide access to markets, capital, and knowledge. UNCTAD (2019) emphasises that digital technologies can enhance governance, financial inclusion, and entrepreneurship, while Adeleke (2021) highlights Nigeria's youthful demographic as a potential driver of innovation in the digital economy.

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Taken together, the literature shows that Nigeria's underdevelopment is the result of entrenched corruption, weak institutions, insecurity, infrastructural deficits, and resource dependence. At the same time, scholars broadly agree that reforms in governance, economic diversification, human capital development, security restructuring, and technological innovation represent feasible pathways towards transformation. However, as Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) caution, without strong political will and institutional commitment, such strategies may remain aspirational rather than transformative.

3 Methodology

This study employed a historical and descriptive survey design, a choice considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to both describe existing conditions and interrogate complex socio-political phenomena. As Frankfort-Nachmias (1996, cited in Udom, 2016) observes, a research design functions as the blueprint that directs the stages of investigation and provides solutions to identified problems. In this sense, the design allowed for the systematic collection of both historical and contemporary data on the factors militating against Nigeria's socio-economic development and the strategies required to overcome them.

The research covered the Federal Republic of Nigeria and drew respondents from institutions directly connected to foreign policy and socio-economic management. These included the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, eighteen Nigerian diplomatic missions abroad, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), the Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget and National Planning, the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission, relevant staff of the National Assembly, and academics from Akwa Ibom State University, the University of Uyo, and Baze University, Abuja. These groups were purposively chosen because of their specialised knowledge of international relations, public policy, and economic development.

The study population was estimated at 450 individuals comprising elected and appointed public officials, diplomats, senior civil servants, and academics. From this population, a stratified random sampling technique was applied to ensure fair representation across the different categories of respondents. A total sample size of 300 was drawn, and 250 valid responses were retrieved and analysed. This sample consisted of 215 personnel from foreign missions and relevant ministries, 25 members and staff of the National Assembly, 20 university lecturers, and 40 scholars in related fields. By engaging these categories of respondents, the study ensured that both policy-level and academic perspectives were adequately reflected.

Data for the study were generated from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered in hard copy and electronically, using platforms such as SurveyMonkey for respondents abroad. The instrument comprised two sections, one focusing on demographic data and



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the other on substantive items relating to the objectives of the study. The questions were designed to elicit both close-ended and open-ended responses, capturing measurable trends and nuanced insights. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly books, peer-reviewed journals, government publications, official records, and reports of international organisations such as the World Bank, UNDP, and Transparency International, in addition to reliable media outlets.

Validity of the instrument was ensured through expert review and pilot testing. Senior officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission, and academics in political science and international relations scrutinised the questionnaire, leading to the refinement of several items. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) recommend, triangulation and expert review strengthened the authenticity and scope of the instrument. Reliability was demonstrated through consistency of responses, with the expectation that similar studies under comparable conditions would yield analogous results.

For data analysis, the study adopted a mixed approach that combined descriptive statistics with thematic interpretation. Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were presented in the form of frequencies and percentages to reveal trends across respondent categories, while qualitative data from open-ended responses and documentary evidence were analysed thematically. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, themes were identified, reviewed, and refined to capture patterns relating to corruption, insecurity, weak institutions, infrastructural deficits, and strategies for economic transformation.

Throughout the research, ethical standards were upheld. Informed consent was sought from participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Care was taken to avoid harm, deception, or misrepresentation of data, while due acknowledgement was given to all scholarly contributions to maintain academic integrity.

4 Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of 300 respondents were administered optioned questions, and 250 were adopted and utilised in data analysis, as shown in Table 4.1 below. The data is analysed quantitatively through simple percentage calculations.

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Table 4.1: Classification of Respondents.

Responses	Number of People	Number Issued Questionnaire	Number Invalidated	Number Used	% Percentage of Used Questionnaire
Nigeria Diplomatic Missions Overseas	130	70	5	65	26%
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	105	70	15	55	22%
NIIA	50	35	5	30	12%
Ministry of finance/ budgeting national planning	20	15	3	12	4.8%
Nigerian Diaspora Commission	35	25	5	20	8%
Staff of Senate and House Committee on Foreign Affairs and other Relevant Committees	35	25	5	20	8%
University Lecturers	25	20	2	18	7.2%
Scholars	50	40	10	30	12%
Total	450	300	50	250	100%

Source: Field Work, 2024.

Research Question One:

What are the militating factors against Nigeria realising a satisfactory level of socio-economic development?

One of the aims of this was to identify the major factors militating against Nigeria's socio-economic development. As shown in Table 4.2 below, an overwhelming majority of respondents (90 percent) affirmed that the failure to utilise foreign policy instruments as drivers of socio-economic development has stalled the country's developmental progress. Only 10 percent remained undecided, while none disagreed with the proposition

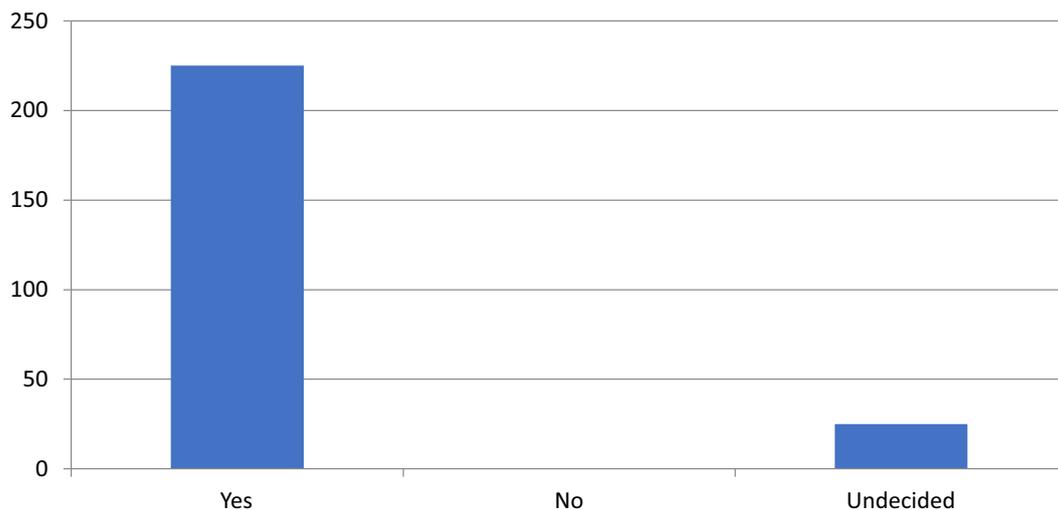
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Table 4.2: Respondents' Views on Whether the Failure to Utilise Foreign Policy for Socio-Economic Development Stalls Nigeria's Progress

Responses	Number	Percentage
Yes	225	90%
No		0
Undecided	25	10%

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

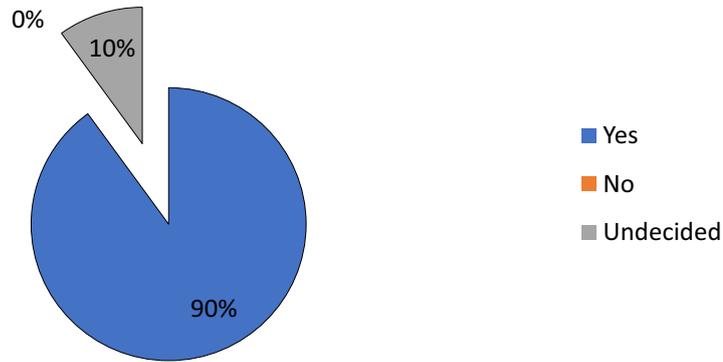
This near unanimity underscores the perception that Nigeria's foreign policy has historically been disconnected from national socio-economic priorities, a finding consistent with Akinboye's (2013) description of Nigeria as “beautiful abroad but ugly at home.” Al-Hassan (2014) similarly laments the nation's “false generosity abroad and penury at home,” while Mailafia (2021) argues that foreign policy must ultimately be judged by how much it advances national power, influence, and developmental interests. These findings point to a broader pattern of misplaced priorities, where successive administrations have devoted substantial resources to Afrocentric commitments while neglecting domestic developmental needs such as infrastructure, employment, and poverty alleviation.



Source: Field Work, 2024.

Figure 4.1: Pie Chart Showing Failure to Utilise Nigeria’s Foreign Policy to Elicit Socio-Economic Development Stall Nigeria’s Developmental Progress.

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Source: Field Work, 2024.

Figure 4. 2: Pie Chart Showing Failure to Utilize Nigeria’s Foreign Policy to Elicit

Research Question Two:

What measures, strategies or approaches should Nigeria adopt in order to achieve maximum results from its foreign policy engagements in the direction of developing a high level of socio-economic development?

While the barriers appear daunting, the study also identified several strategies that could reposition Nigeria towards socio-economic transformation. As indicated in Table 4.3, 98 percent of respondents agreed that effective utilisation of foreign policy instruments, particularly through economic diplomacy, can enhance developmental progress, with only 2 percent undecided.

Table 4.3: Respondents' Views on the Use of Foreign Policy Instruments and Opportunities for Socio-Economic Transformation

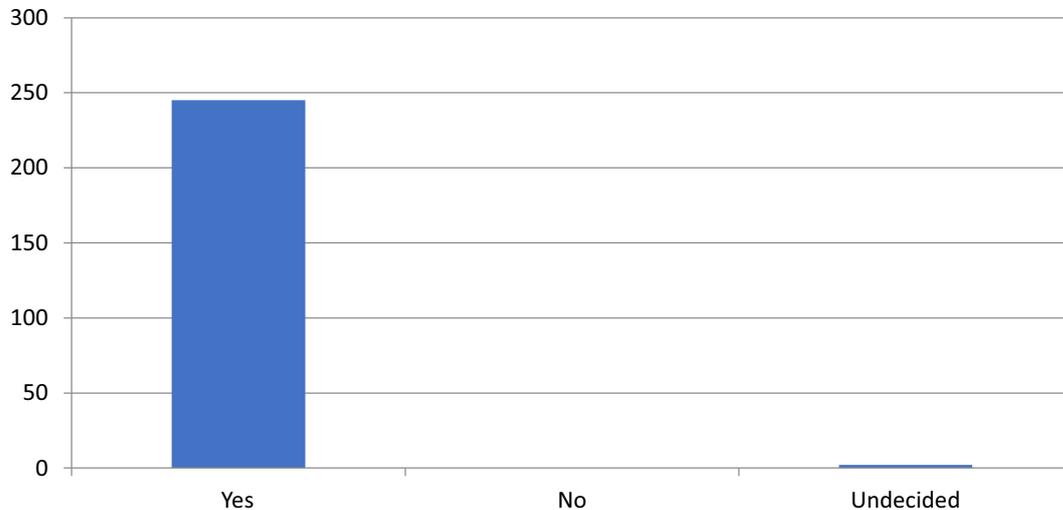
Responses	Number	Percentage
Yes	245	98%
No	0	0
Undecided	5	2%

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

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Beyond foreign policy misalignments, corruption and weak governance were consistently highlighted as major impediments. More than two-thirds of respondents identified corruption, policy inconsistency, and weak institutions as the most critical obstacles, echoing Achebe's (1981) position that leadership failure remains Nigeria's fundamental problem, and Ogbeidi's (2012) argument that corruption has eaten deep into the nation's fabric. Transparency International's (2022) Corruption Perception Index further validates these findings by ranking Nigeria among the lowest globally in governance and accountability.

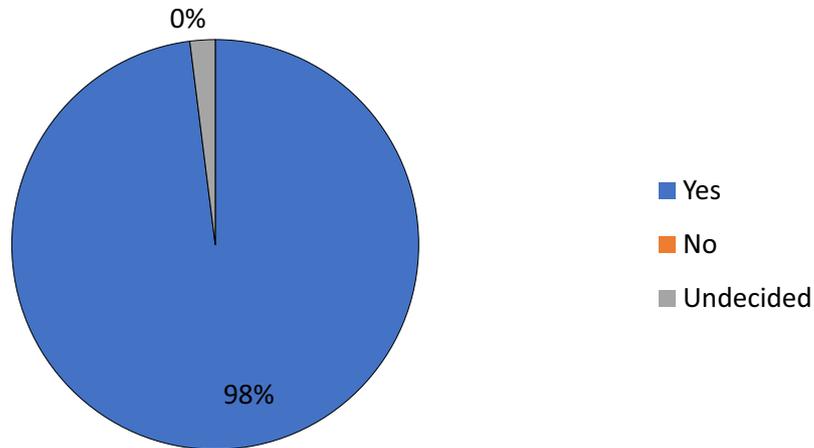
Insecurity also featured prominently among the militating factors. Respondents pointed to the Boko Haram insurgency, farmer–herder conflicts, and widespread banditry as phenomena that have displaced communities, disrupted agricultural activities, and diverted national resources away from long-term development into short-term security expenditures. These findings correspond with the observations of the International Crisis Group (2020), Ezirim (2021), and Okoli and Lenshie (2018), all of whom highlight insecurity as a systemic obstacle to Nigeria's development. Similarly, infrastructural deficits such as unreliable power supply, poor transport systems, and inadequate healthcare were cited by over 60 percent of respondents, a view supported by Eberhard et al. (2011) and Nweke (2018).



Source: Field Work, 2024.

Figure 4. 3: Bar Chart Showing Effective and Efficient Use of Foreign Policy and Opportunities as Agents of Economic Development

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Source: *Field Work, 2024.*

Figure 4. 4: Pie Chart Showing Effective and Efficient Use of Foreign Policy and Opportunities as Agents of Economic Development

Further, as Table 4.4 shows, 96 percent of respondents supported the adoption of a deliberate government policy thrust anchored on foreign policy for socio-economic development, while only 4 percent were unsure.

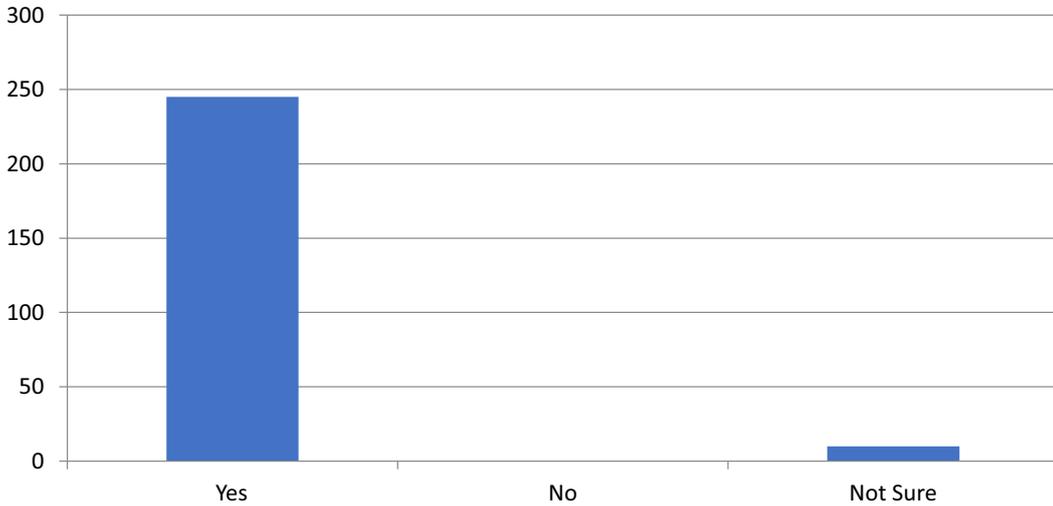
Table 4.4: Government Adoption of a Policy Thrust, which is Based on Utilisation of Foreign Policy to Engender Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria

Responses	Number	Percentage
Yes	240	96%
No	0	0
Not Sure	10	4%

Source: *Field Survey, 2024.*

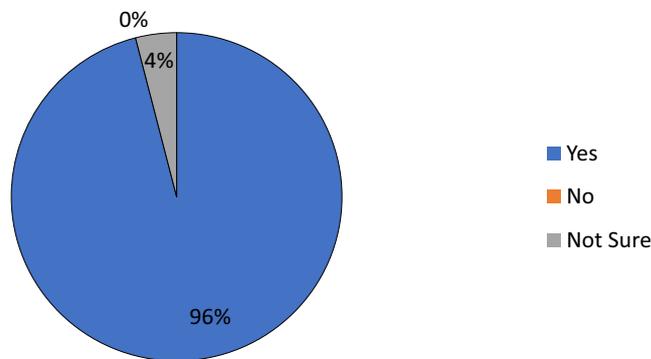
This finding is consistent with Rodrik's (2008) argument that development requires deliberate policy design and Sachs' (2015) position that nations must integrate external engagements into internal development priorities. In other words, foreign policy cannot be pursued in isolation from national development planning.

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Source: Field Work, 2024.

Figure 4. 5: Bar Chart Showing Government Adoption of Policy Thrust, which is Based on the Utilization of Foreign Policy to Engender Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria



Source: Field Work, 2024.

Figure 4. 6: Pie Chart Showing Government Adoption of Policy Thrust, which is Based on the Utilisation of Foreign Policy to Engender Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria

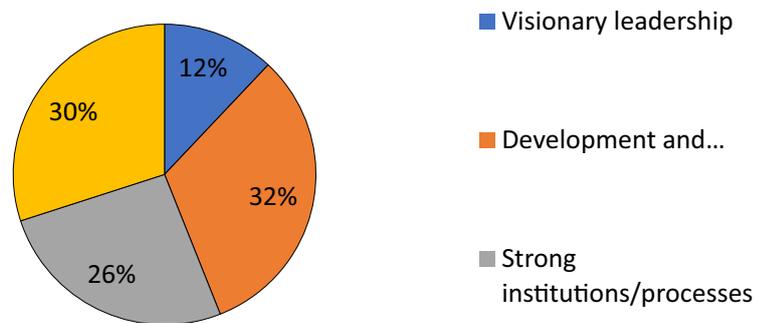
Finally, respondents identified several enabling conditions required for such a reorientation to succeed. As presented in Table 4.5 percent stressed the importance of competent policy focus backed by skilled personnel, 30 percent emphasised adequate financing, 26 percent prioritised strong institutions, and 12 percent cited visionary leadership.

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Table 4.5: Respondents' Views on other Factors Enhancing Success in a New Development-Oriented Foreign Policy

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Visionary leadership	30	12%
Right policy focus with competent personnel	80	32%
Strong institutions and processes	65	26%
Adequate financing	75	30%
Total	250	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2024.



Source: Field

Figure 4.7: Pie Chart showing Factors that Enhance Success in a New Foreign Policy

These findings affirm scholarly consensus that visionary leadership and inclusive institutions are critical for development (Achebe, 1981; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Respondents' emphasis on competent policy design reflects the need for technocratic expertise in governance, while the demand for adequate financing resonates with World Bank (2020) reports that highlight chronic underfunding of Nigeria's reform initiatives. Together, these elements—leadership, competent policies, strong institutions, and financing—represent a holistic framework for transforming Nigeria's developmental prospects.

Taken collectively, the findings reveal that while corruption, insecurity, infrastructural deficits, policy inconsistency, and weak institutions remain entrenched obstacles to Nigeria's socio-economic transformation, there is broad consensus that these barriers can be overcome through a deliberate strategy that combines visionary leadership, institutional reforms, economic diversification, human capital development, security restructuring, and a development-oriented foreign policy. As Acemoglu and

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Robinson (2012) caution, however, the success of such strategies ultimately depends on political will and institutional commitment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to interrogate the factors militating against Nigeria's socio-economic development and to identify workable strategies that could reposition the country on a path of transformation. The findings demonstrate that despite Nigeria's vast human and material resources, persistent barriers such as corruption, insecurity, infrastructural decay, weak institutions, poor policy implementation, and overdependence on oil revenues have consistently hindered sustainable progress. The survey results revealed strong consensus among respondents that Nigeria's foreign policy, if effectively aligned with national priorities, can serve as a powerful tool for socio-economic transformation. This consensus is supported by the literature, which highlights the centrality of governance quality, institutional strength, and strategic policy choices in shaping developmental outcomes (Achebe, 1981; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Sachs, 2015).

The study concludes that Nigeria's developmental crisis is not the result of a lack of resources or opportunities but rather of leadership failure, policy inconsistency, and institutional weakness. Unless these challenges are decisively addressed, socio-economic transformation will remain elusive. However, the findings equally reveal that Nigeria possesses the capacity to reverse its trajectory through reforms in governance, economic diversification, human capital development, and security sector restructuring. Reorienting foreign policy towards economic diplomacy and national interest provides an additional pathway for leveraging international opportunities for domestic gains.

In light of these findings, several recommendations are advanced. First, Nigeria must strengthen governance and institutional frameworks by enforcing accountability, curbing corruption, and depoliticising public institutions. This requires political will at the highest levels and the establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Second, the economy must be diversified beyond oil, with deliberate investments in agriculture, manufacturing, technology, and small and medium enterprises. Such diversification would not only reduce vulnerability to external shocks but also generate employment and stimulate inclusive growth. Third, priority must be given to human capital development through sustained investment in education, vocational training, and healthcare. Empowering Nigeria's youthful population is particularly crucial for innovation and competitiveness in the global digital economy.

Fourth, comprehensive security sector reforms are essential to restore stability and create an enabling environment for development. This entails restructuring the security architecture, strengthening intelligence systems, and adopting community-based approaches to conflict prevention. Fifth, Nigeria's foreign policy must be recalibrated towards tangible economic benefits. Economic diplomacy, bilateral trade agreements, and targeted partnerships in science, technology, and infrastructure should

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be pursued with the explicit aim of advancing domestic development. Finally, adequate financing, visionary leadership, and competent technocratic management are indispensable in ensuring that these strategies move beyond rhetoric to practical implementation.

In sum, the prospects for Nigeria's socio-economic development in the 21st century are real but contingent upon the country's ability to dismantle entrenched militating factors and embrace strategic pathways grounded in good governance, diversification, security, and human capital development. If pursued with consistency and sincerity, these reforms have the potential to transform Nigeria from a nation of paradoxical underdevelopment into one of inclusive prosperity and global relevance.

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