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Policy-Implementation Nexus in Nigeria's Sustainable Development Trajectory: Bridging Rhetoric and Reality.

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Abstract
This article addresses the significant disconnect between policy formulation and implementation that has defined Nigeria's efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since their adoption in 2015. Through a detailed analysis of Nigeria's three Voluntary National Reviews (2017, 2020, and 2025) and sectoral policy evaluations, the study identifies ongoing implementation gaps in areas such as environmental sustainability, climate governance, and agricultural development. Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF), and creating successive national development plans based on the 2030 Agenda—progress remains inconsistent. An analysis of 52 key performance indicators indicates that only 34.6% show improvement, while 30.8% have stagnated, and another 34.6% have regressed (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025).
This article argues that Nigeria's challenge in sustainable development stems not from a lack of policy ambition, but from a crisis of implementation coherence. This issue is further complicated by structural fiscal constraints (government revenue at only 9.6% of GDP), limitations in institutional capacity, and the complex relationship between climate commitments and dependence on hydrocarbon resources (Yamoah, 2025). To address these challenges, the study proposes a framework for strengthening the links between policy and implementation through improved inter-agency coordination, data-driven governance, and inclusive stakeholder engagement as Nigeria approaches the 2030 deadline.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Policy Implementation, Nigeria, Climate Governance, Institutional Capacity, Policy Coherence, National Development Planning

I. Introduction

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, Nigeria, like other United Nations member states, has committed to an ambitious framework of 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets designed to transform global development trajectories (United Nations, 2015). As Africa's largest economy and a major oil producer, Nigeria occupies a uniquely complex position in the sustainable development landscape. The country is simultaneously endowed with vast natural and human resources while grappling with profound socio-economic disparities, environmental degradation, and governance challenges that have historically undermined development aspirations (Oweibia et al., 2024).

The Nigerian government has demonstrated consistent institutional commitment to the SDG framework. The country has anchored successive development strategies in the 2030 Agenda. These include the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (2017-2020), the Economic Sustainability Plan (2020), and the current National Development Plan (2021-2025) (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025). Three Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)—submitted in 2017, 2020, and 2025—reflect Nigeria's rhetorical commitment to accountability, inclusivity, and evidence-based policymaking. The 2025 review adopted a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. This involved consultations across all six geopolitical zones (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025).

Yet beneath this institutional architecture lies a troubling pattern: policy ambition consistently outpaces implementation capacity. The 2025 VNR candidly acknowledges that SDG progress has been "mixed," with only one-third of key performance indicators showing improvement and an equivalent share regressing (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025). This implementation deficit reflects a broader phenomenon observed across Sub-Saharan African oil-dependent economies. These economies experience systematic policy-implementation gaps driven by executive dominance, fossil fuel dependence, institutional capacity constraints, and complex international influences (Yamoah, 2025).

This article interrogates Nigeria's sustainable development trajectory by examining the

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gap between policy formulation and implementation across three critical domains: environmental sustainability and climate governance, agricultural development, and institutional coordination. Drawing on policy analysis, VNR data, and sectoral assessments, it argues that Nigeria's challenge lies not in policy ambition but in implementation coherence. This gap must be bridged if the country is to make meaningful progress toward the 2030 targets.

II. Nigeria's Policy Framework for Sustainable Development: Structure and Ambition

Nigeria has constructed an elaborate institutional architecture for SDG implementation since 2015. The Ministry of Budget and National Planning coordinates SDG efforts, working alongside the Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025). This framework has been progressively strengthened through multiple initiatives. These include the alignment of the National Statistical System with SDG indicators, the design and rollout of the Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF), and the adoption of the Inclusive Data Charter Action Plan (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025).

The National Development Plan (2021-2025) represents the most comprehensive effort to integrate SDG targets into national planning. The plan aims to "unlock Nigeria's vast economic potential through broad-based, inclusive, and resilient economic transformation." It prioritizes job creation, poverty reduction, and infrastructure development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025). Similarly, environmental governance has been formalized through the National Climate Change Policy and Response Strategy. This was initially introduced in 2012 and updated in 2021. Nigeria has also committed under the Paris Agreement to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 (Akpan & Udoh, 2025).

Agricultural policy has also undergone significant recalibration. The government's agricultural policy framework (2016-2022) emphasizes agribusiness as an instrument for economic development. It seeks to leverage the sector's contribution to non-oil exports and employment (NALTF, 2025). Complementary policies across sectors demonstrate Nigeria's rhetorical commitment to sustainable development. Green governance mechanisms are being adopted in the energy sector (Discover Sustainability, 2025). Stakeholder engagement frameworks are being developed for the construction industry (Isang et al., 2025). Climate adaptation strategies are being integrated into national planning (Akpan & Udoh, 2025).

However, this policy landscape reveals a characteristic tension. While institutional frameworks have expanded and policy coverage has broadened, implementation capacity has not kept pace. This gap between ambition and execution constitutes the central challenge of Nigeria's sustainable development trajectory.

III. Implementation Realities: Evidence from Key Sectors

3.1 Environmental Sustainability and Climate Governance

Nigeria's National Climate Change Policy and Response Strategy has contributed to several positive developments. It has helped create climate governance structures. It has heightened awareness of climate risks. It has also facilitated integration of climate considerations into national planning (Akpan & Udoh, 2025). However, its overall impact has been "constrained by implementation challenges" (Akpan & Udoh, 2025). These challenges include weak inter-agency coordination, inadequate financial resources, and insufficient enforcement mechanisms that undermine policy effectiveness.

The policy-implementation gap is particularly acute in Nigeria's oil-producing Niger Delta region. Here, the tension between hydrocarbon dependence and climate commitments is most visible (Yamoah, 2025). Research on post-2015 agreement coherence in Sub-Saharan African oil-dependent economies has identified "systematic policy-implementation gaps." These stem from what scholars term "four critical barriers: executive dominance, fossil fuel dependence, institutional capacity constraints, and complex international influence" (Yamoah, 2025, p. 45). These barriers manifest in Nigeria as conflicting policy objectives. The government simultaneously pursues climate action commitments while promoting oil and gas sector expansion. This sector accounts for over 80% of foreign exchange earnings (Yamoah, 2025).

A Concrete Example: The Great Green Wall Initiative

A concrete illustration of this implementation gap is Nigeria's participation in the Great Green Wall initiative. Launched in 2015, this ambitious program aims to combat desertification

International Journal of Engineering, Management and Humanities (IJEMH)
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across the Sahel region by planting a wall of trees stretching from Senegal to Djibouti. Nigeria committed to restoring 4 million hectares of degraded land (Federal Ministry of Environment, 2016). However, by 2023, only 12% of this target had been achieved (National Agency for the Great Green Wall, 2023). The initiative has faced multiple implementation barriers. These include inadequate funding, weak coordination among federal and state agencies, community resistance to land-use changes, and insufficient technical capacity for large-scale afforestation. The program also suffers from inconsistent political commitment, with leadership changes at both federal and state levels disrupting continuity.

Contrasting Example: Rwanda's Successful Forest Restoration

In contrast, Rwanda provides a compelling example of successful policy implementation in a comparable African context. Rwanda's forest landscape restoration program achieved 78% of its reforestation targets between 2016 and 2023 (Rwanda Environment Management Authority, 2023). The key success factors included strong presidential commitment, clear institutional mandates for implementation, community-based benefit-sharing mechanisms, and robust monitoring systems using satellite technology. The program also integrated reforestation with livelihood support, providing alternative income sources for communities, thereby reducing pressure on forests. Rwanda established a dedicated Green Fund that mobilizes domestic and international resources specifically for environmental projects (Rwanda Environment Management Authority, 2023). Nigeria could adapt this approach by establishing a similar dedicated funding mechanism and institutional framework for its environmental programs.

3.2 Agricultural Policy and Food Security

Agricultural policy evaluation provides another lens on Nigeria's implementation challenges. Despite the sector employing approximately 70% of the labor force and contributing 75% of non-oil export earnings, agricultural policies have consistently failed to achieve objectives of food self-sufficiency and rural development (NALTF, 2025). The disconnect between policy frameworks and implementation outcomes has been attributed to "inadequate coordination," "lack of clear roles among the three tiers of government," and insufficient input subsidies and support for farmers (Onah & Ndu, 2025).

Historical patterns illustrate the recurring nature of these failures. Programmes such as Operation Feed the Nation (1976-1979) and the Green Revolution (1979-1983) were implemented "with negligence of the structural action and lack of transparency" (Evaluation of Agricultural Policies, 2025). More recently, the challenge of policy continuity has emerged as "a great obstacle." Successive administrations have failed to sustain and build upon agricultural interventions (Evaluation of Agricultural Policies, 2025). This lack of policy coherence and coordination across government levels has resulted in persistent food insecurity and rural poverty. This persists despite Nigeria's vast arable land resources—approximately 72.2 million hectares of cultivable land, representing 23% of all arable land in West Africa (NALTF, 2025).

A Concrete Example: The Agriculture Promotion Policy (2016-2022)

The Agriculture Promotion Policy (APP), also known as the "Green Alternative," provides a stark example. Launched in 2016, the APP set ambitious targets: achieve food self-sufficiency within three years, increase agricultural exports from $2.2 billion to $7 billion annually, and create 3.5 million jobs in the agricultural sector (Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2016). However, by the policy's end in 2022, none of these targets had been met. The food import bill had actually increased to $4.6 billion (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The Anchor Borrowers' Programme, a flagship component providing credit to smallholder farmers, reached only 3.2 million farmers against a target of 10 million. Many beneficiaries received loans but lacked access to extension services, fertilizer, and quality seeds. The program also suffered from loan repayment rates below 40%, indicating both challenges in farmer productivity and weaknesses in loan recovery mechanisms.

Contrasting Example: Ghana's Planting for Food and Jobs Program

Ghana's "Planting for Food and Jobs" program (launched in 2017) offers instructive lessons. This initiative provided subsidized fertilizers and improved seeds to 1.5 million farmers in its first year, leading to a 30% increase in maize production in 2018 (Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Ghana, 2019). Key success factors included: (1) a clear, simple implementation framework that avoided bureaucratic complexity; (2) partnerships with private sector input suppliers that

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ensured timely delivery of subsidized inputs; (3) integration with an e-voucher system that reduced corruption and improved targeting; (4) regular farmer training and extension services; and (5) stable political commitment across the policy period. Ghana also established an inter-ministerial coordination committee that met quarterly to review progress and address implementation challenges. Nigeria could adapt elements of Ghana's approach, particularly the use of technology to improve input distribution and reduce bureaucratic layers that delay implementation.

3.3 Institutional and Governance Challenges

Cross-cutting institutional challenges compound sectoral implementation gaps. Weak legislative impetus and political will, corruption, inadequate public awareness, and the absence of validated baseline data have been identified as fundamental obstacles to SDG attainment (Onah & Ndu, 2025). The absence of formative, mid-course, and proper end-line evaluation further undermines the capacity for adaptive policy learning and course correction.

Fiscal constraints represent a particularly significant barrier. Government revenue accounted for just 9.6% of GDP in 2023, severely limiting the fiscal space for SDG-related investments (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025). While the tax-to-GDP ratio has modestly risen from 5.5% in 2020 to 6.7% in 2022, and diaspora remittances contribute nearly 6% of GDP, these resources remain insufficient to meet the extensive financing requirements of sustainable development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025). The funding gap for climate mitigation alone is estimated at $2.8 trillion by 2030 (Yamoah, 2025).

IV. The Implementation Gap: A Policy Coherence Perspective

The consistent pattern of implementation deficits across sectors suggests that Nigeria's challenge is systemic rather than sector-specific. Research on policy coherence in Sub-Saharan Africa has found that among 311 policies mapped across 48 countries, only 22% integrated both climate and SDG objectives. This reveals "striking climate policy dominance (60% versus 40% SDGs policies)" (Yamoah, 2025, p. 78). This imbalance reflects broader tensions between short-term economic imperatives and long-term sustainability objectives.

Yamoah's (2025) analysis of policy coherence in oil-dependent economies provides a framework for understanding Nigeria's implementation challenges. The study identifies three interconnected constraints:

1. **Governance weaknesses**, including executive dominance that limits policy deliberation and accountability;
2. **Capacity constraints**, including technical, financial, and human resource limitations; and
3. **External pressures**, including international influence that may not align with domestic development priorities.

These constraints interact to produce what can be termed "implementation incoherence"—a situation where policies are formulated without adequate consideration of implementation realities, leading to persistent gaps between ambition and achievement.

In the Nigerian context, this incoherence manifests in several ways. First, there is a tendency to adopt international frameworks—such as the SDGs and Paris Agreement—without fully assessing domestic implementation capacity. Second, policy formulation often occurs in isolation from implementation agencies. This results in plans that are ambitious but operationally unrealistic. Third, monitoring and evaluation systems remain underdeveloped, limiting opportunities for learning and adaptation. Fourth, stakeholder engagement, particularly at sub-national levels, remains inadequate, undermining ownership and accountability (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025).

V. Performance Indicator Trends: Visualizing Progress and Gaps

The following data visualization provides a clear picture of Nigeria's progress toward SDG implementation across key indicators.

Summary of Nigeria's SDG Performance Trends (2015-2025)
Key Indicators with Notable Regression:

- Access to electricity → Declined from 56% to 54% (2020-2024)
- Primary school enrollment → Declined from 72% to 65% (post-COVID)
- Poverty headcount → Increased to 40.1% (from 33.3% in 2017)
- Manufacturing share of GDP → Declined from 9.3% to 8.2%

International Journal of Engineering, Management and Humanities (IJEMH)
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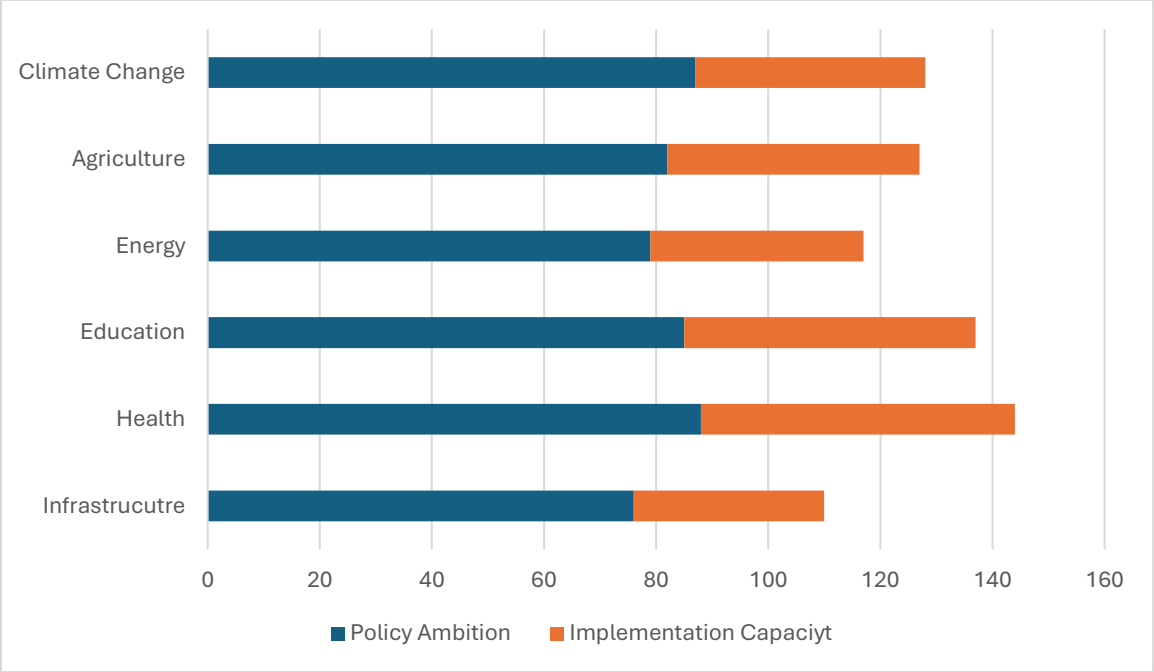
Key Indicators with Notable Improvement:

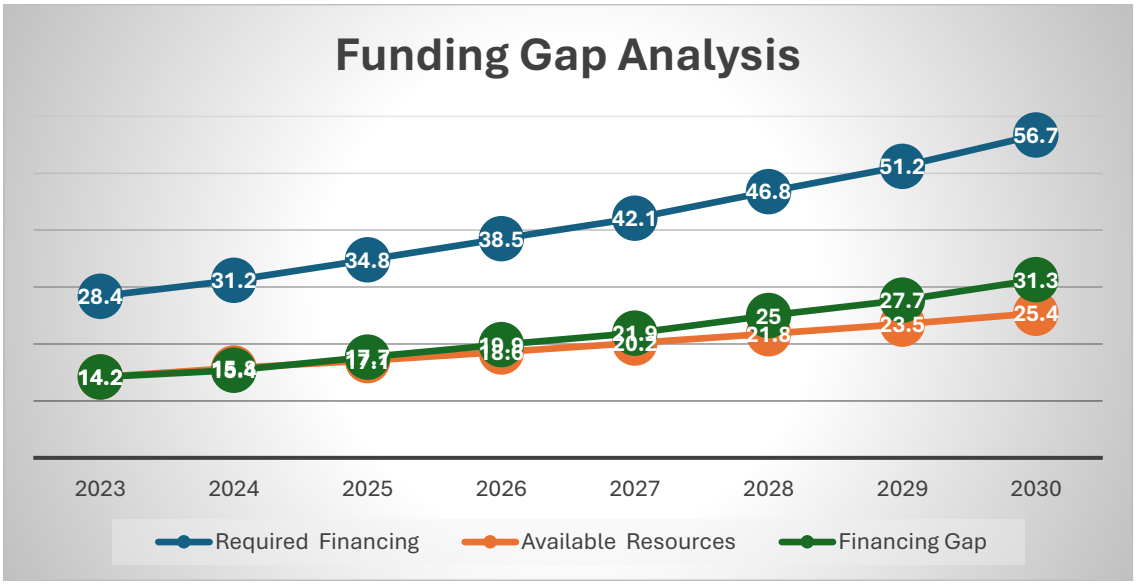
- Internet penetration → Increased from 38% to 55%
- Skilled birth attendance → Increased from 43% to 58%
- Agricultural value added → Increased by 2.3% annually



Source: Adapted from Yamoah (2025) and Federal Republic of Nigeria (2025)

Figure 1: Sectoral Implementation Capacity Assessment (2025)

The following chart shows the gap between policy ambition and implementation capacity across selected sectors



Source: Adapted from Yamoah (2025) and Federal Republic of Nigeria (2025)

Figure 2: Funding Gap Analysis (in Trillions of Naira)

International Journal of Engineering, Management and Humanities (IJEMH)
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The following chart illustrates the gap between SDG financing needs and available resources (2023-2030 projections)

Table 1 Funding Gap Analysis Table

Year	Required Financing	Available Resources	Financing Gap
2023	28.4	14.2	14.2
2024	31.2	15.8	15.4
2025	34.8	17.1	17.7
2026	38.5	18.6	19.9
2027	42.1	20.2	21.9
2028	46.8	21.8	25.0
2029	51.2	23.5	27.7
2030	56.7	25.4	31.3

Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria (2025). INFF Framework.

Visual Interpretation: The data reveals that the financing gap is projected to widen from ₦14.2 trillion in 2023 to ₦31.3 trillion by 2030. This represents a 120% increase over the period, indicating that without significant fiscal reforms and innovative financing mechanisms, Nigeria's SDG implementation will face increasingly severe resource constraints.

VI. Towards Bridging the Gap: Strategies for Implementation Enhancement

Addressing Nigeria's policy-implementation gap requires a comprehensive approach. This approach must strengthen institutional capacity, enhance policy coordination, and deepen stakeholder engagement. The following strategies emerge from analysis of Nigeria's experience and comparative policy scholarship.

6.1 Strengthening Data and Evidence Infrastructure

The 2025 VNR emphasizes the importance of timely, reliable, and disaggregated data for responsive policymaking (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025). Implementing the Inclusive Data Charter Roadmap and strengthening the reengineered National Statistical System are critical priorities. Improved data infrastructure would enable more effective monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive policy management.

Case Example: The National Bureau of Statistics' (NBS) partnership with the World Bank to conduct annual Living Standards Measurement Studies has improved data availability for poverty and welfare analysis. However, sub-national data remains weak. Learning from the Ghana Statistical Service's district-level data collection systems could provide a model for Nigeria (World Bank, 2023).

6.2 Enhancing Policy Coherence Mechanisms

Research on policy coherence recommends establishing "Integrated Policy Coherence Units" and "Climate-SDGs Budgeting Systems." These would ensure that policy objectives are aligned across sectors and that implementation activities are adequately resourced (Yamoah, 2025). These mechanisms would help address the fragmentation that currently undermines implementation effectiveness.

Recommended Framework: Drawing from Indonesia's experience with the "SDGs Dashboard," Nigeria could establish a real-time policy coherence monitoring platform. This would track alignment between federal and state-level policies and identify conflicts or redundancies across sectors. Such a platform was instrumental in Indonesia achieving a 67% SDG alignment score by 2023, up from 42% in 2018 (Bappenas, 2023).

6.3 Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement

The 2025 VNR's whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach offers a model for deepening stakeholder engagement (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025). Building on the consultative processes conducted across geopolitical zones and with marginalized groups, more systematic engagement mechanisms could strengthen policy ownership, accountability, and local-level implementation capacity.

Example of Success: The Kebbi State Agricultural Development Project demonstrates the value of stakeholder engagement. When the Anchor Borrowers' Programme failed in other states due to poor engagement, Kebbi State implemented a co-design approach. Farmers were involved in program design and implementation decisions. As a result, Kebbi achieved an 85% loan repayment rate and significant productivity gains, compared to the

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national average of 40% repayment (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2022).

6.4 Addressing Fiscal Constraints

While structural fiscal challenges require fundamental reforms, targeted strategies can expand implementation resources. These include enhancing domestic revenue mobilization, leveraging diaspora remittances for development finance, and improving the efficiency of public expenditure through better coordination and accountability mechanisms (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025).

Innovative Financing Example: The Lagos State Employment Trust Fund provides a model for innovative SDG financing. The fund leverages a combination of state government contributions (₦25 billion), donor support, and commercial bank guarantees to provide affordable credit to small businesses. Between 2017 and 2023, the fund disbursed over ₦16 billion to 12,000 businesses, creating an estimated 85,000 jobs directly linked to SDG targets on poverty reduction and decent work (Lagos State Employment Trust Fund, 2023).

6.5 Strengthening Accountability and Anti-Corruption

Institutional corruption has been identified as a fundamental obstacle to SDG realization (Onah & Ndu, 2025). Strengthening accountability mechanisms, enhancing transparency in public procurement, and empowering civil society oversight are essential for translating policy ambition into implementation reality.

Promising Initiative: The Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative, which Nigeria joined in 2016, has facilitated improvements in fiscal transparency and citizen participation. Following OGP commitments, Nigeria launched the "BudgIT" citizen budget portal, which allows citizens to track government expenditures in real-time. This has enhanced accountability and reduced procurement fraud in some states, including Kaduna and Lagos (BudgIT, 2024).

Comparative Lesson: Kenya's implementation of the "Integrated Financial Management Information System" (IFMIS) reduced procurement fraud by an estimated 40% between 2015 and 2020 (World Bank, 2022). Nigeria's similar initiative, the "Government Integrated Financial Management Information System" (GIFMIS), has been only partially implemented. Full rollout and integration with state-level financial systems could significantly reduce the leakage of SDG-related funds.

VII. Conclusion

Nigeria's sustainable development trajectory reveals a fundamental paradox. Policy ambition has expanded dramatically while implementation capacity has stagnated. As the 2030 deadline approaches, bridging this gap must become a national priority. The challenge is not simply one of additional resources or new policies. It requires fundamental reform in how policies are formulated, coordinated, and implemented.

The 2025 VNR's candid acknowledgment of mixed progress—with one-third of indicators regressing—marks an important step toward honest policy discourse (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025). But acknowledgment must be followed by action. The design of the next Medium-Term National Development Plan (2026-2030) offers a critical opportunity to embed implementation-enhancing mechanisms from the outset.

Drawing on concrete examples of successful implementation in similar contexts, this article has identified several promising pathways. These include strengthening data infrastructure through sub-national data collection systems. They include establishing policy coherence monitoring platforms. They include deepening stakeholder engagement through co-design approaches. They also include expanding innovative financing mechanisms and enhancing accountability through technology-enabled transparency.

The Nigerian case offers broader lessons for developing countries navigating sustainable development challenges. Implementation gaps often reflect deeper structural constraints that require systemic rather than piecemeal solutions. The 2030 deadline is approaching. The choice before Nigeria is clear: either continue a pattern of implementation failure, or fundamentally transform the relationship between policy ambition and developmental reality. The evidence from successful cases—whether Ghana's agricultural program, Rwanda's forest restoration, or Lagos State's employment fund—demonstrates that transformative implementation is possible. The question is whether Nigeria will learn from these examples and adapt them to its unique context before the 2030 deadline passes.

Authors Declaration

All the authors declared that there is no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request

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