

Rethinking Social Interventions and Rising Poverty in South-South Nigeria: Toward an Integrative Social Development and Sustainability (ISODS) Framework

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Abstract

Despite Nigeria's vast natural resource wealth, particularly in the oil-rich South-South region, poverty levels remain alarmingly high and continue to rise. This paradox underscores a critical disconnect between social intervention efforts and the lived realities of vulnerable populations. This study rethinks the design, implementation, and outcomes of Nigeria's social intervention programmes by examining their role in addressing — or inadvertently perpetuating — poverty in the South-South geopolitical zone. Through a qualitative analysis of policy documents, socio-economic indicators, and scholarly literature, the paper investigates how structural challenges such as poor governance, policy inconsistency, corruption, environmental degradation, and weak institutional frameworks have undermined the effectiveness of social protection initiatives. It argues that while numerous interventions have been launched with poverty alleviation as a central goal, their fragmented and short-term nature fails to address the systemic and region-specific drivers of poverty. The article advocates for the adoption of an Integrative Social Development and Sustainability (ISODS) Framework developed by Bassey Anam (2024) as a comprehensive policy alternative that aligns social interventions with long-term economic planning, environmental justice, and inclusive governance. By proposing a context-sensitive, integrated approach, the study contributes to rethinking poverty reduction strategies in resource-rich yet socio-economically deprived regions like Nigeria's South-South.

Keywords: *Social Interventions, Poverty, South-South Nigeria, Integrative Social Development and Sustainability (ISODS) Framework*

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Background to the Study

In 2024, the World Bank reported that Nigeria had overtaken other countries to become home to the largest number of people living in extreme poverty, with over 106 million individuals affected (World Bank, 2024). This alarming development was echoed by the World Bank Vice President during Nigeria's National Economic Summit, highlighting the worsening trajectory of poverty in Africa's most populous nation (BusinessDay, 2024). Although the scale may have intensified, the phenomenon itself is not new. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, poverty reduction has consistently featured as a core policy objective, beginning with President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration and its efforts at post-military economic reform. Despite this policy attention, successive interventions have failed to reverse the tide of deepening poverty.

A closer examination of Nigeria's historical and contemporary poverty alleviation efforts reveals a recurring pattern of weak programme design, inadequate implementation, and institutional dysfunction. From the populist poverty programmes under Shehu Shagari to the targeted initiatives of recent administrations, social intervention efforts have often lacked coherence, sustainability, and adaptability. By 1999, Nigeria's Human Development Index (HDI) stood at a mere 0.47, with nearly 70% of the population living in poverty (Ayodeji & Adebayo, 2015). Endemic corruption, policy inconsistency, poor coordination, and insufficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms have continued to undermine the impact of these interventions.

Nowhere is this failure more visible than in the South-South geopolitical zone. As Nigeria's main oil-producing region, the South-South paradoxically combines vast resource wealth with profound socioeconomic deprivation. According to the 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index, the region registered an index value of 0.25, reflecting high levels of deprivation across key indicators such as education, healthcare, housing, and access to clean water (Nairametrics, 2022). Over 70% of youth in the region live below the poverty line—an indicator of both entrenched vulnerability and the inadequacy of existing interventions. Environmental degradation, conflict over resource control, and poor governance have further complicated poverty dynamics in the region. Since 1999, numerous social intervention programmes—including conditional cash transfers, public works schemes, youth empowerment initiatives, and food subsidy plans—have been launched. Yet, as Antai and Anam (2014) observe, these efforts often suffer from repetitive design, lack of contextual responsiveness, and minimal long-term impact. In many cases, programmes are recycled across successive administrations with little modification or evidence-based refinement.

As Nigeria's population is projected to exceed 250 million by 2030 (Eghosa, 2025), the need for a radical rethinking of social intervention strategies is urgent. Persistent poverty not only impedes sustainable development but also threatens national cohesion and regional stability, particularly in fragile, resource-rich areas such as the South-South. This study critically interrogates the link between social interventions and the rising levels of poverty in South-South Nigeria. Through a qualitative analysis of policy documents, programme evaluations, and secondary socio-economic data, the paper assesses the extent to which existing

interventions have responded to the region's complex realities. It argues that meaningful poverty reduction in such a context demands more than isolated programmes or short-term fixes. To this end, the study proposes the Integrative Social Development and Sustainability (ISODS) Framework—a holistic policy model designed to embed social protection within a broader, context-sensitive, and sustainable development paradigm.

Objectives of the study

The primary aim of this study is to critically examine the relationship between social intervention strategies and the rising levels of poverty in South-South Nigeria, with a view to proposing an Integrative Social Development and Sustainability (ISODS) Framework as a transformative public policy model for sustainable poverty alleviation and national development. The specific objectives include to,

1. Examine the framework of Nigeria's Social Protection Interventions
2. Assess social intervention strategies and its impact in the South-South Nigeria Region: Case Examination
3. Evaluate the incidence of poverty in South-South Nigeria
4. Identify factors affecting the implementation of Social Protection Policies in South-South Nigeria
5. Adopt the Integrative Social Development & Sustainability (ISODS) Framework

Methodology

A descriptive and interpretive case study design was employed to examine the patterns of poverty and the evolution of social protection interventions in the South-South region. This design allows for the systematic exploration of policy documents, programme reports, and secondary data sources to evaluate how interventions have addressed (or failed to address) the region's multidimensional poverty.

The study relies on secondary sources of data, including: official government documents and policy reports (e.g. National Development Plans, intervention programme blueprints, and poverty reduction strategies), publications from international development agencies (e.g. World Bank, UNDP), peer-reviewed journal articles, and reports and databases from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). The study employs thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and gaps in the design and implementation of social intervention programmes. Key themes explored include targeting efficiency, funding adequacy, policy coherence, institutional capacity, and political commitment. Data were organised into analytical categories aligned with the study's objectives.

Conceptual Clarifications

The Concept of Poverty

Poverty remains one of the most pressing and persistent global development challenges. Its eradication is central to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1, which seeks to end all forms of poverty by the year 2030. However, defining poverty is a complex and multifaceted task, with meanings and measurements varying across disciplines, cultural contexts, and analytical frameworks. Nyasulu (2010) categorises poverty

definitions into several conceptual groups: statistical, income-based, living standards, political, capability-based, expert-derived, layperson-derived, and social. Each provides a unique lens through which poverty can be understood. Statistical and income-based definitions, for instance, utilise quantifiable indicators such as the income thresholds established by the World Bank—less than US\$2.15 per day for extreme poverty and US\$6.85 per day for poverty in middle-income countries. Expert-derived definitions often rely on technical constructs such as the Household Subsistence Level (HSL) and Household Effective Level (HEL), developed by Potgieter (1980), or indices such as the Human Poverty Index (HPI), formulated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Yet, beyond these technical frameworks, Nyasulu (2010) contends that poverty should fundamentally be regarded as “a violation of human rights.” This perspective foregrounds the experiential dimensions of poverty, highlighting the need to listen to and engage the poor themselves in crafting policy responses. It implies that any meaningful poverty reduction effort must not only consider statistical data but also incorporate the voices and lived realities of those affected. In this light, the poor are repositioned not merely as passive recipients of aid but as active participants in shaping their own development trajectories. Increasingly, poverty is recognised as multidimensional, context-specific, and structural (Gweshengwe & Hassan, 2020). Whether interpreted as absolute or relative, poverty denotes a severe deprivation of basic human needs and opportunities. It entails the inability to secure adequate food, shelter, clothing, education, and healthcare. It also encompasses broader dimensions of exclusion—social, economic, and political—where individuals are marginalised from participation, lack access to productive resources, and remain vulnerable to environmental, economic, and physical threats. Moreover, poverty represents a denial of dignity, autonomy, and voice. It is both a cause and a consequence of inequality and injustice. As such, effective responses to poverty must transcend income redistribution and embrace comprehensive social protection systems, institutional reforms, and inclusive governance.

The Concept of Social Protection Policy

According to the Nigerian **National Social Protection Policy** (2020), social protection refers to the programmes, policies, and initiatives implemented by the Nigerian government, organisations (both profit and non-profit), and individuals with the aim of addressing vulnerabilities, supporting the poor, providing safeguards in times of unexpected hardship, and establishing a minimum standard of living for all citizens within the nation's jurisdiction. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines social protection—or social security—as a comprehensive system of policies and programmes designed to prevent and mitigate poverty, economic shocks, and social vulnerabilities across all stages of life. It encompasses various forms of assistance and risk mitigation strategies aimed at supporting disadvantaged groups. These measures seek to shield individuals from economic and social distress due to a loss or reduction of income, often caused by contingencies such as illness, maternity, workplace injury, unemployment, disability, old age, or the death of a breadwinner. Social protection also includes access to healthcare services and family benefits.

Social protection is widely recognised as a universal human right and a core responsibility of government. It is a fundamental pillar for achieving inclusive social and economic

development, closely linked to improved outcomes in health, income stability, and human security. Moreover, social protection plays a critical role in realising the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Governments are thus expected to ensure that no citizen falls below a minimum threshold of social and economic well-being, security, and dignity, as enshrined in the concept of a Social Protection Floor. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, social protection can take multiple forms, each targeting specific societal needs. Broadly, these interventions are categorised as follows:

1. **Non-contributory schemes:** These programmes provide benefits without requiring prior financial contributions from recipients. Commonly known as social assistance programmes, they aim to alleviate poverty through direct support to vulnerable and marginalised populations, such as conditional cash transfers and food subsidies.
2. **Contributory schemes:** These are funded through regular contributions from individuals and/or employers, typically in the form of payroll taxes or premiums. Examples include pension systems and health insurance schemes. By pooling resources, such schemes offer protection against economic risks like job loss, illness, or old age, thereby helping individuals manage life's uncertainties.
3. **Labour market policies:** These interventions offer support to individuals who are unemployed or underemployed. They may be either contributory or non-contributory in nature and can be classified as:
 - (a) Active measures, which include training and employment services designed to enhance skills and facilitate reintegration into the labour market.
 - (b) Passive measures, which involve income support mechanisms intended to protect against wage loss due to unemployment, underemployment, declining real wages, or engagement in precarious or informal employment.

Nigeria's Social Protection Interventions

Nigeria's public policy approach to social protection interventions dates back to the 1970s, although such initiatives were not explicitly termed “social protection” at the time. Over the years, these interventions have evolved into a broader umbrella policy framework, encapsulated in the National Social Protection Policy (NSPP), which seeks to reduce poverty and promote human dignity for all citizens. The policy aims not only to alleviate immediate hardships but also to address inequalities, provide social incentives, and enhance equity in access to basic services and economic opportunities.

The legal and constitutional basis for social protection in Nigeria is rooted in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), particularly within the *Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy*. These provisions mandate the state to direct its policies toward ensuring the welfare and security of its citizens. Despite its vast population and socio-economic challenges, Nigeria allocates less public expenditure to social protection than most other lower-middle-income countries and several of its regional peers. This underinvestment persists even as the demand for comprehensive and inclusive social protection has become more urgent in light of rising poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The current trajectory of social protection in Nigeria therefore requires a strategic reimagination to ensure future effectiveness and impact.

Table 1 below presents a retrospective analysis of social protection policies and programmes in Nigeria from the pre-1986 period through to 2022. This evaluation is structured around the four functional categories of social protection as outlined by Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004). Each intervention is assessed in terms of its purpose, nature, and intended outcomes. In line with this framework, social protection interventions are categorised into four primary functional types:

1. **Protective Interventions:** These are designed to provide immediate relief and safety nets to vulnerable individuals and households during periods of acute hardship, such as economic shocks, food insecurity, or displacement. Examples include unconditional cash transfers, emergency food aid, and public works programmes.
2. **Preventive Interventions:** These aim to reduce the risk of future deprivation by mitigating socio-economic vulnerabilities. Initiatives in this category include contributory pension schemes, health insurance programmes, and agricultural insurance to cushion the effects of price volatility and natural disasters.
3. **Promotive Interventions:** These focus on building human capital and enhancing income-generating capacity. Such programmes support long-term development through vocational skills training, microcredit access, youth empowerment schemes, and education subsidies.
4. **Transformative Interventions:** These seek to confront and reform structural inequities and social exclusion that underpin chronic poverty and marginalisation. Transformative measures include gender equity initiatives, legal rights advocacy, disability inclusion policies, and efforts to strengthen civic participation and social justice.

Although some programmes may straddle multiple functions, for the purpose of this analysis, each intervention is classified according to its primary functional goal, following the Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler typology. The assessment highlights the diverse objectives and varying degrees of effectiveness of these interventions, thereby offering insights into the gaps, achievements, and areas in need of reform within Nigeria's social protection landscape.

Table 1: Nigeria's Social Protection Policies and Interventions, Pre-1986 -2022

Period & Intervention	Category (Function)	Description	Role and Effectiveness	Policy Evaluation/Challenges
National Accelerated Food Production Program (NAFPP) (1973)	Promotive	Aimed at boosting food production to ensure food security and self-sufficiency.	Partially effective in increasing agricultural output but limited by poor infrastructure and policy continuity challenges.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of coordination • Poor Funding • Limited cooperation of farmers • Shortage of Extension workers
Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) (1976)	Promotive	Promoted farming to encourage self-sufficiency and reduce hunger.	Created public awareness of agricultural selfreliance, though it was not sustained long enough for lasting impact on food security.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate infrastructure/extension services • Lack of long-term commitment • Bureaucratic inefficiency • Political instability
Free Primary Education (UPE) (1976)	Promotive/ Protective	Aimed at increasing educational access and reducing illiteracy.	Initially successful in expanding educational access, though constrained by funding and implementation issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor planning • Poor funding • Limited resources • Limited facilities
STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAM (SAP) ERA (1986-1999)				
Directorate for Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) (1986)	Promotive	Created to improve rural infrastructure and enhance agricultural productivity.	Had limited impact due to poor project sustainability and corruption issues; successes were uneven across regions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor financing • Inadequate sustainability
Better Life for Rural Women Program (1987)	Transformative/Promotive	Empowered rural women through skill acquisition, health, and literacy programs.	Initially impactful in promoting women's roles in rural economies, but outcomes diminished with the transition in political leadership.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate funding • Poor implementation • Socio-cultural barriers • Political interference • Lack of sustainability
National Directorate of Employment (NDE) (1986)	Promotive	Aimed at reducing unemployment through vocational training and job creation initiatives.	Effective in creating job training opportunities, but limited reach due to funding constraints and urban-focused implementation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor funding • Poor public awareness • Corruption • Political Interference
POST-SAP ERA (1999-2010)				
Poverty Alleviation Program (PAP) (2000)	Protective/ Promotive	Provided jobs and temporary income support to address immediate poverty.	Short-lived program with limited long-term impact on poverty alleviation. Effectiveness was hindered by poor targeting and lack of sustainable funding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor targeting • Corruption • Political Interference • Lack of proper monitoring & evaluation • Poor implementation • Lack of sustainability
National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) (2001)	Promotive/ Protective	Focused on reducing poverty through microcredit, skill acquisition, and empowerment programs.	Moderately effective in reaching rural areas and vulnerable populations, though impact varied due to implementation inefficiencies and political changes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor implementation • Inadequate funding • Corruption • Ineffective monitoring • Poor coordination between government agencies • Political interference • Lack of sustainability
Universal Basic Education (UBE) (2004)	Promotive	Reintroduced and expanded access to basic education as a fundamental right for all Nigerian children.	Effective in increasing enrolment rates, though challenges like inadequate facilities, poor teacher quality, and funding gaps persisted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate funding • Poor Infrastructure • Personnel challenges • Poor implementation • Lack of continuity
National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) (2005)	Preventive	Established to provide access to affordable healthcare through a contributory health insurance model.	Limited effectiveness due to low enrolment, especially among informal sector workers, though successful in providing some risk protection for enrollees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low enrolment • Poor service delivery • Rural exclusion • Lack of transparency and accountability

In-Care of the Poor (COPE) (2007)	Protective/ Preventive	Targeted at extremely poor households (those headed by a female, the elderly, physically challenged, and fistula or HIV/AIDS patients) with children of school-going age;	Break intergenerational transfer of poverty and reduce the vulnerability of the core poor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited coverage • Poor service delivery • Poor infrastructural development
SOCIAL PROTECTION INITIATIVES (2010-2022)				
Community-Based Health Insurance Scheme (CBHIS) (2011)	Preventive	Established to provide health insurance access to people in the informal economy who might not be covered under traditional NHIS plans	Offers financial protection against healthcare costs by pooling funds within a community, however, its effectiveness is limited by factors like low participation rates and challenges in managing the scheme, especially for the poorest populations within the community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding • Poor uptake and community involvement • lack of clear legislative and regulatory frameworks • Accountability and transparency in management of the scheme • Availability of adequate number of the various cadres of health workers • Availability of essential drugs
SURE-P (Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Program) (2012)	Promotive/ Protective	Invested fuel subsidy savings into social welfare programs, skill acquisition, and employment generation.	Impacted some sectors positively but struggled with issues of corruption and lack of accountability, limiting overall effectiveness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underpaid youths • Difficulty identifying beneficial projects • Duplication of functions • Corruption
National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) (2016)	Protective/ Promotive/ Transformative	Umbrella initiative comprising the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), N-Power, School Feeding Program, and Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP).	Effective in reaching vulnerable populations; N-Power provided employment opportunities, and CCT improved welfare but faced issues in funding and data accuracy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor implementation • Inadequate funding • Corruption & political interference • Data management issues • Lack of proper monitoring • Inadequate exit strategies for beneficiaries • Lack of sustainability plans
Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) (2016)	Protective/ Promotive	Provides cash transfers to the poorest households, with the goal of reducing poverty and incentivizing school attendance and health services.	Moderately effective in providing relief to vulnerable households; however, issues with targeting accuracy and limited funding reduced its reach and impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in accurately targeting the most vulnerable beneficiaries • Administrative complexities • Potential for leakage to non-eligible recipients • Insufficient funding
N-Power Program (2016)	Promotive	Offers skills acquisition and employment opportunities to unemployed youth and graduates.	Effective in providing short-term employment, but sustainability and absorption into the labour market remain challenges.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient funds • Corruption • Lack of transparency • Poor exit strategy for beneficiaries • Inappropriate targeting
TraderMoni (2018)	Promotive/ Protective	Provides small loans to informal traders to enhance their businesses and improve livelihood resilience.	Some impact on reducing poverty among traders, but limited in scope and reach, with concerns about political motivations affecting sustainability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor beneficiary profiling • Lack of proper verification mechanisms • Political interference • Inadequate financial literacy among beneficiaries • Difficulties in loan repayment • Limited access to banking services • Lack of transparency in disbursement • Political manipulation
COVID-19 SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSES (2020-2022)				
Conditional Cash Transfer (expanded in 2020)	Protective	Enhanced cash transfer coverage to support vulnerable households affected by COVID-19 lockdowns.	Temporarily effective in providing relief to affected households, though logistical challenges and data constraints limited full impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor targeting and beneficiary selection • Corruption • Logistical difficulties in reaching remote areas • Diversion of funds by beneficiaries • Inadequate monitoring and evaluation systems
Youth Employment and Social Support Operations (YESSO) (2020)	Protective/ Promotive	Aims to provide labour-intensive jobs for the youth and offers cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households.	Effective in creating short-term employment and income relief but struggled with scalability and reaching informal sector youth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate funding • Lack of inclusion • Limited capacity • Lack of transparency

Rapid Response Register (RRR) (2021)	Protective	A digital platform set up to identify and deliver social assistance to urban poor and vulnerable households impacted by COVID-19 and economic challenges.	Effective in targeting the urban poor with cash transfers, though digital literacy and data accuracy were challenges in the rural areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data accuracy issues due to poor data collection methods. • Limited awareness of the program among eligible citizens
Extended N-Power and NSIP Programs (2021-2022)	Promotive/ Protective	Expanded versions of the original programs, providing employment and support for youth, women, and small business owners.	Effective in maintaining support for unemployed youth and small businesses, though criticisms over political influences and targeting persist.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor funding • Political interference • Inadequate monitoring and evaluation • Problem of sustainability, discontinued in 2023.

Table 1 above outlines various intervention strategies adopted by the Nigerian government to reduce poverty. However, these initiatives have faced numerous challenges, as detailed in column five of the table. Statistical evidence reveals that, rather than declining, poverty levels in Nigeria are on the rise, underscoring the ineffectiveness of many of these interventions. The persistence of poverty in Nigeria suggests that existing social protection policies and programmes have failed to adequately address the underlying systemic and structural issues. Despite decades of targeted interventions, poverty remains a deeply entrenched and multifaceted challenge. Several factors account for this failure.

A primary issue lies in the weak implementation and lack of continuity of social programmes. Fragmented institutional arrangements, limited administrative capacity, and frequent shifts in political priorities have severely undermined policy effectiveness. Many programmes suffer from chronic underfunding, poor coordination, and a short-term orientation that focuses on immediate relief rather than long-term solutions to socio-economic vulnerabilities. Moreover, the absence of a universal social registry and the prevalence of unreliable data impede the identification and inclusion of the most vulnerable populations. As a result, social protection initiatives often fail to reach those most in need, diminishing their overall impact.

Another fundamental limitation is the failure to address deeper structural inequalities, including regional imbalances, gender disparities, and inadequate access to quality education and healthcare. For instance, regions like South-South Nigeria continue to experience the paradox of resource wealth coexisting with extreme poverty, due to mismanagement and neglect. The lack of alignment between social protection policies and broader economic development strategies—such as industrialisation, employment creation, and human capital development—has further constrained the effectiveness of poverty alleviation efforts. Nigeria's fragmented and poorly coordinated social protection system has not succeeded in reducing poverty. To be effective, future strategies must be inclusive, data-driven, structurally aligned with national development goals, and implemented with continuity, transparency, and accountability.

Social Intervention Strategies and its impact in the South-South Nigeria Region

Overview of the Area

The South-South region of Nigeria is a vast and resource-rich area located in the southern part of the country. It is widely recognised as the primary hub of Nigeria's oil production. Prior to the discovery of crude oil, the region thrived economically through the palm oil trade, which

was a major source of wealth during the pre-petroleum era. This dual history of natural resource abundance underscores the region's enduring economic significance.

However, the wealth of natural resources in South-South Nigeria has proven to be both a blessing and a curse. While the region contributes substantially to national revenue, it has also experienced the adverse effects of resource dependence, including environmental degradation and socio-economic challenges. As one of the more densely populated regions, South-South Nigeria accounts for over 25% of the country's population. It is home to more than 40 distinct ethnic groups spread across six states: Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, and Edo. Each of these states plays a crucial role in shaping the economic, cultural, and social landscape of the nation.

Figure 1: The South-South Nigeria Region



The paradox of the South-South region of Nigeria lies in its immense resource wealth juxtaposed with the persistent socio-economic challenges faced by its population. Despite making a substantial contribution to Nigeria's national revenue, the region continues to suffer from environmental degradation, widespread poverty, and chronic underdevelopment. Oil exploration has brought with it not only economic promise but also infrastructural neglect, ecological devastation, and social unrest. The result is a volatile environment where the potential for prosperity is consistently undermined by entrenched inequality and marginalisation.

This paradox positions the South-South not only as an economically significant region but also as a critical focal point for addressing the complex intersections of poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and sustainable development in Nigeria. The region presents a particularly stark illustration of the shortcomings of social intervention programmes. Despite decades of oil extraction and the establishment of numerous specialised intervention agencies—such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs (MNDA), Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP), and various state-level initiatives—the region remains afflicted by multiple developmental challenges:

1. **Environmental Impoverishment:** Oil spills and gas flaring have devastated farmlands and waterways, destroying traditional means of livelihood and generating widespread food insecurity. Social intervention programmes have largely failed to address the scale of this environmental damage or provide viable, long-term alternative livelihoods.
2. **Infrastructural Deficits:** Many oil-producing communities still lack basic infrastructure such as clean water, electricity, functional healthcare facilities, and all-weather roads, despite the development mandates of intervention agencies.
3. **Youth Restiveness and Unemployment:** High levels of youth unemployment, coupled with feelings of injustice and exclusion, have historically fuelled militancy and criminality. Although programmes like the Presidential Amnesty Programme have sought to curb this restiveness, concerns persist regarding the long-term viability of reintegration efforts and whether such programmes effectively reach the most vulnerable groups.
4. **Governance Failures in Intervention Agencies:** Institutions such as the NDDC have been consistently dogged by allegations of corruption, contract fraud, and abandoned projects. Forensic audits have revealed large-scale financial mismanagement. Resources intended for regional development and poverty alleviation are often diverted, leaving communities no better off. Intense political competition to control these agencies further undermines their developmental purpose.

In this context, social intervention programmes in the South-South, rather than serving as solutions, may at times exacerbate existing problems by:

1. **Creating Illusions of Progress:** The announcement of large budgets and numerous projects often masks the lack of real impact, fostering a superficial sense of progress.
2. **Distorting Local Economies:** The poorly managed influx of funds can create unsustainable economic bubbles and dependencies, rather than encouraging lasting economic diversification and productivity.
3. **Exacerbating Grievances:** When communities observe significant allocations earmarked for their welfare yet experience little to no tangible improvement, feelings of frustration, alienation, and injustice are intensified. This disillusionment can, in turn, trigger further social unrest. Thus, the failure of these programmes to deliver meaningful change reinforces the need for a more accountable, inclusive, and integrated approach to development in the South-South region of Nigeria.

Evaluation of Poverty in South-South Nigeria

A incidence of poverty trends in the South-South region of Nigeria, despite the implementation of various social protection programmes, reveals persistent and deep-rooted socio-economic challenges. Decades of interventions have not significantly altered the trajectory of poverty, underscoring the ineffectiveness of many policy efforts.

1. Persistent Poverty in South-South States

The South-South region continues to experience high levels of poverty, despite its resource wealth. Delta (45%) and Cross River (42%) record poverty incidences well above the national

average of 35%, while Akwa Ibom (35%) aligns with the regional mean but still signals a significant failure of long-standing anti-poverty strategies. These figures are particularly concerning considering the region's substantial oil revenues.

Self-assessed poverty indicators further underscore the region's economic vulnerability. In Delta, 81% of residents perceive themselves as poor, while in Cross River the figure stands at 77%. Notably, 25% of Delta's population categorise themselves as "Very Poor", signalling the lived experience of deprivation beyond income metrics alone. Similarly, Gini coefficients for Akwa Ibom (0.50) and Cross River (0.50) reflect deep income inequality and an uneven distribution of wealth within these oil-producing states.

2. Limited Success of Social Protection Policies

Despite the introduction of various social protection policies from the pre-1986 era to 2022, their impact in the South-South appears minimal. This is evident in the share of the population in the lowest wealth quintile (core poor), where Akwa Ibom (27%) and Cross River (33%) both exceed the national average of 21.3%. These statistics suggest that current social interventions have not adequately reached or uplifted the most impoverished segments of the population.

3. Rural Poverty and Inequality

Rural poverty remains a critical challenge in South-South Nigeria, where extensive oil extraction has not translated into meaningful socio-economic benefits for local communities. Despite being the heart of Nigeria's petroleum industry, the region continues to experience a poverty incidence of 35%, highlighting the failure of existing policies to address the distinct dynamics of oil-dependent rural economies. Moreover, Gini coefficients across South-South states consistently exceed the national average of 0.49, underscoring deep-rooted income inequality. This disparity is further exacerbated by the systematic exclusion of rural populations from the redistribution of oil wealth, leaving many communities underdeveloped and economically marginalised.

4. Discrepancies in Self-Perceived Poverty

In Bayelsa State, while the official poverty incidence (20%) and core poor population (22%) are comparatively lower, the subjective experience of poverty remains high. A striking 95% of Bayelsa residents consider themselves poor, with 62% identifying as "Very Poor". This discrepancy between statistical poverty and perceived hardship points to broader issues of quality of life, access to services, and unmet expectations from resource wealth.

Table 2: Summary of Key Poverty Indicators by State

State	Poverty Incidence (%)	Core Poor (%)	Self-Assessed Poverty (%)	Very Poor (Self-Assessed, %)	Gini Coefficient
Akwa Ibom	35	27	66	17	0.50
Bayelsa	20	22	95	62	0.47
Cross River	42	33	77	22	0.50
Delta	45	23	81	25	0.47
Edo	33	16	79	35	0.46
Rivers	29	19	67	15	0.48
South-South	35	23	77	29	0.51
North-East	72	35.4	81	26.5	0.46
Nigeria	54	21.3	76	21.37	0.49

Source: Francis et al. (2011)

The persistence of poverty in a region as economically significant as South-South Nigeria reflects a failure not only of design but of implementation, monitoring, and governance of social protection initiatives. Moving forward, there is a pressing need to reassess and restructure these policies to address systemic inequalities and align outcomes with the region's development potential. Social Intervention Programmes points to significant systemic failings. While these programmes are not intended to cause poverty, their inefficiencies, misdirection, or unintended consequences often mean they do little to alleviate it. In some contexts, they may even contribute to the perpetuation of poverty.

Factors affecting the implementation of Social Protection Policies in South-South Nigeria

Given the rising levels of poverty in the South-South region, several constraints to the effective implementation of social protection policies have been identified, including:

1. Flaws in Policy or Programme Design

(a) Poor Targeting:

Many social intervention programmes suffer from weak targeting mechanisms, resulting in the inclusion of non-poor individuals (elite capture) and the exclusion of genuinely vulnerable groups. This severely undermines their intended impact. A major limitation is the absence of robust and regularly updated social registries.

(b) One-Size-Fits-All Approach:

Programmes designed centrally at the federal level often fail to account for regional and local specificities. In the South-South, distinct challenges—such as environmental degradation and the erosion of traditional livelihoods—are frequently overlooked by generic national schemes.

(c) Inadequate Benefit Levels:

The cash transfers or in-kind benefits provided under most intervention schemes are typically

insufficient to sustainably lift households out of poverty or shield them from economic shocks—especially in high-cost environments such as parts of the South-South.

2. Flaws in Policy Implementation

(a) Corruption and Mismanagement:

Perhaps the most pervasive obstacle is corruption. Resources allocated for interventions are often misappropriated by officials and political cronies. Procurement fraud, fictitious beneficiaries, and inflated contracts are common—particularly within large infrastructure-based initiatives such as those undertaken by the NDDC (SERAP, 2021).

(b) Lack of Transparency and Accountability:

The opaque processes surrounding beneficiary selection, fund disbursement, and project monitoring erode public trust and increase the likelihood of malpractice.

(c) Weak Institutional Capacity:

Many implementing agencies lack the technical, financial, and logistical capacity required to administer complex programmes effectively.

(d) Political Interference:

Social intervention programmes are frequently politicised, being directed toward politically loyal communities or individuals rather than those in genuine need. This undermines both fairness and effectiveness.

3. Issues with Policy Sustainability

(a) Short-Term Focus and Lack of Exit Strategies:

Most programmes are designed as short-term palliatives with no clear pathways for transitioning beneficiaries into sustainable livelihoods. This fosters dependency rather than empowerment.

(b) Poor Integration with Broader Economic Policies:

These programmes often operate in isolation, disconnected from broader economic strategies such as job creation, agricultural modernisation, or industrial development—thereby limiting their long-term impact.

4. Neglect of Structural Drivers of Poverty

(a) Superficial Interventions:

Many programmes address the symptoms rather than the root causes of poverty—such as poor governance, social inequality, lack of access to quality education and healthcare, insecure land tenure, and limited economic opportunities.

(b) South-South Context:

In the Niger Delta, failure to address the political economy of oil, environmental justice, and meaningful community participation in resource governance has hindered the success of interventions. Environmental degradation continues to impoverish communities dependent

on land and water—challenges that small-scale programmes cannot resolve without broader structural reforms.

5. Potential Unintended Negative Consequences

(a) Crowding Out Private Initiative:

Over-reliance on state-led interventions may discourage private enterprise and local entrepreneurial efforts, stifling grassroots economic development.

(b) Social Division:

Inequitable implementation of programmes can generate resentment and tension among excluded populations, especially when benefits are perceived to be distributed along ethnic or political lines.

(c) Fuel for Conflict in the South-South:

In the Niger Delta, significant allocations to agencies such as the NDDC have at times become sources of political competition and conflict. Allegations of capture by political godfathers and militant actors illustrate how intervention resources can inadvertently reinforce instability rather than alleviate poverty (ICG, 2015).

Given the rising level of poverty in the South South Region, some the constraints of effective implementation of social protection policies are identified to include,

1. Flaws in Policy or Programme design

(a) Poor Targeting: Many social intervention programmes suffer from weak targeting mechanisms, resulting in the inclusion of non-poor individuals (elite capture) and the exclusion of genuinely vulnerable groups. This severely dilutes the intended impact. A key limitation is the absence of robust and regularly updated social registries.

(b) One-Size-Fits-All Approach: Programmes designed centrally at the federal level frequently fail to account for regional and local peculiarities. In the South-South, specific challenges such as environmental degradation and the erosion of traditional livelihoods are often ignored by generic national schemes.

(c) Inadequate Benefit Levels: The cash transfers or in-kind benefits provided under most intervention schemes are typically insufficient to sustainably lift households out of poverty or shield them from economic shocks—particularly in high-cost environments like parts of the South-South.

2. Flaws in Policy Implementation

(a) Corruption and Mismanagement: Perhaps the most pervasive obstacle is corruption. Resources allocated for interventions are frequently misappropriated by officials and political cronies. Procurement fraud, fictitious beneficiaries, and inflated contracts are widespread, especially within large infrastructure-based initiatives such as those undertaken by the NDDC (SERAP, 2021).

(b) **Lack of Transparency and Accountability:** The opaque processes surrounding beneficiary selection, fund disbursement, and project monitoring reduce public confidence and increase the risk of malpractice.

(c) **Weak Institutional Capacity:** Many of the implementing agencies lack the necessary technical, financial, and logistical capacities to administer complex programmes effectively.

(d) **Political Interference:** Social Intervention Programmes are often politicised, being directed towards politically loyal communities or individuals rather than those in genuine need. This practice undermines fairness and effectiveness.

3. **Issues with policy sustainability**

(a) **Short-Term Focus and Lack of Exit Strategies:** Most programmes are short-term palliatives with no clear pathways for transitioning beneficiaries into long-term sustainable livelihoods. This can foster dependency rather than empowerment.

(b) **Poor Integration with Broader Economic Policies:** These programmes frequently operate in isolation, unlinked to broader economic strategies such as job creation, agricultural modernisation, or industrial development—further reducing their potential to effect lasting change.

4. **Neglect of structural drivers of poverty**

(a) **Superficial Interventions:** Intervention programmes often address the symptoms rather than the root causes of poverty—such as poor governance, inequality, lack of access to quality education and healthcare, insecure land tenure, and limited economic opportunities.

(b) **South-South Context:** In the Niger Delta, a failure to address the political economy of oil, environmental justice, and meaningful community participation in resource governance has limited the success of interventions. Environmental degradation continues to impoverish communities dependent on land and water—challenges that small-scale programmes alone cannot resolve without broader structural reform.

5. **Potential unintended negative consequences**

(a) **Crowding Out Private Initiative:** Over-reliance on state-led interventions may discourage private enterprise and local entrepreneurial efforts, hindering grassroots economic development.

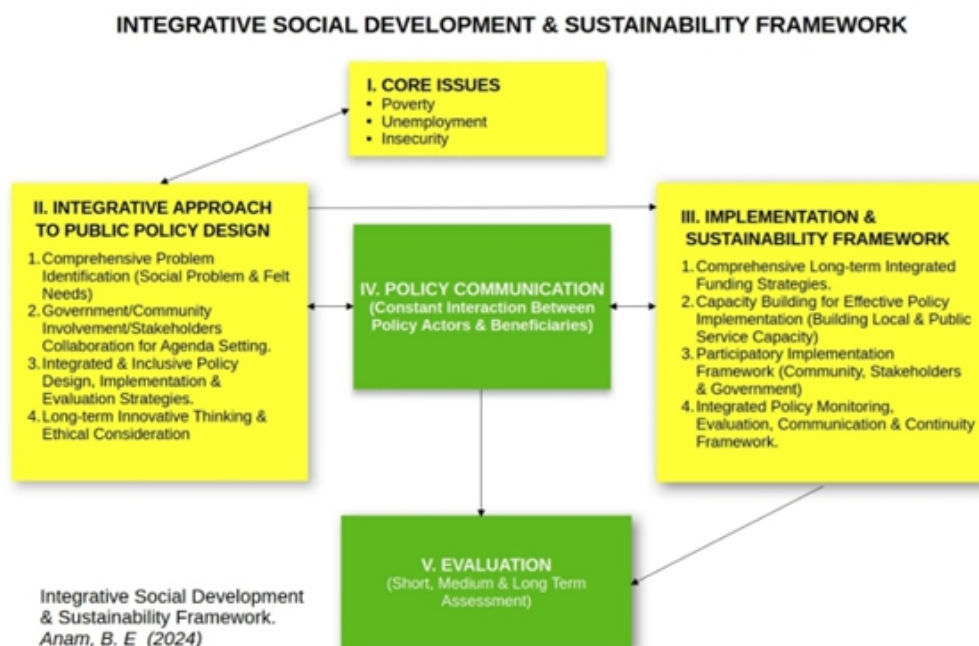
(b) **Social Division:** Inequitable programme implementation can breed resentment and tension among excluded populations, particularly if benefits are perceived to be distributed along ethnic or political lines.

(c) **Fuel for Conflict in the South-South:** In the Niger Delta, significant allocations to agencies like the NDDC have, at times, become sources of political competition and conflict. Allegations of capture by political godfathers and militant actors highlight how intervention resources can inadvertently reinforce instability rather than reduce poverty (ICG, 2015).

Adopting the Integrative Social Development & Sustainability (ISODS) Framework

The **Integrative Social Development and Sustainability (ISODS) Framework**, developed by Bassey Anam (2024), represents a strategic, multidimensional approach designed to address persistent failures in policy implementation and to deliver lasting developmental outcomes. Anam posits that this inclusive framework is specifically tailored to confront the systemic challenges that have consistently undermined the effectiveness of social intervention programmes in Nigeria. Drawing upon a historical analysis of policy shortcomings and inspired by internationally successful models—such as Singapore's institutionalised, long-term development planning—the ISODS Framework seeks to close the gap between policy formulation and practical implementation by promoting

- a) Stronger policy coherence and institutional coordination,
- b) Greater political insulation and programme sustainability,
- c) Enhanced beneficiary involvement and ownership,
- d) Robust data infrastructure for targeting and evaluation, and
- e) Adequate, sustainable funding mechanisms.



The South-South region of Nigeria, despite its status as the economic heartbeat of the country due to vast oil reserves, continues to grapple with endemic poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment. The failure of successive social intervention programmes to reverse these trends highlights the need for a fundamentally different approach to poverty reduction. The Integrative Social Development & Sustainability (ISODS) Framework offers such a paradigm shift—one rooted in inclusivity, contextual relevance, and long-term sustainability.

1. **Addresses Structural Causes of Poverty:** The ISODS Framework emphasises the importance of addressing the root causes of poverty, including weak governance, environmental degradation, youth unemployment, and exclusion from resource control. In the South-South, where environmental damage from oil exploitation has destroyed livelihoods and displaced communities, a structural approach is critical. ISODS moves beyond treating symptoms and seeks systemic reforms to build resilient communities.
2. **Promotes Context-Specific Policy Design:** Unlike many generic, top-down intervention models, ISODS supports a bottom-top development approach, which prioritises local knowledge, regional peculiarities, and participatory problem identification. This is particularly important in the South-South, where issues such as oil-related environmental pollution, resource conflict, and infrastructural neglect are unique and require tailored solutions.
3. **Strengthens Stakeholder Participation and Ownership:** ISODS fosters collaboration between government, local communities, civil society, and the private sector. This participatory governance model empowers local actors, enhances transparency, and ensures that development interventions are not only locally accepted but are also driven by the people themselves. Such ownership is crucial for sustainability and social inclusion.
4. **Promotes Integrated and Inclusive Policy Implementation:** The Framework encourages a holistic policy integration—linking social protection, job creation, infrastructure, education, health care, and environmental management. This multisectoral coordination prevents policy fragmentation and maximises the developmental impact of each intervention. For the South-South, where oil wealth has often failed to trickle down due to disconnected policies, this integration is vital.
5. **Focuses on Long-Term Sustainability:** ISODS insists on long-term planning, innovative thinking, and ethical governance. It discourages short-term palliatives and political handouts, instead promoting policies that build the capacity of communities and institutions to be self-sufficient over time. In a region frequently marred by politically-driven, short-lived projects, ISODS offers a framework for enduring development.
6. **Improves Monitoring, Evaluation, and Communication:** Effective poverty reduction depends on the continuous assessment of what works and what doesn't. ISODS incorporates robust monitoring, evaluation, communication, and continuity mechanisms, ensuring that programmes are adaptable, transparent, and accountable. This feedback loop is particularly necessary in the South-South, where many previous interventions failed due to poor tracking and oversight.
7. **Enhances Institutional Capacity and Policy Coherence:** By investing in capacity building for both public officials and community members, ISODS strengthens the institutional frameworks required to implement effective programmes. In a region often plagued by weak institutions and corruption, this focus is essential to ensure policy coherence, ethical conduct, and effective delivery of services.
8. **Aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** The ISODS Framework is designed to align with the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals,

particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). By grounding local interventions in global development benchmarks, ISODS helps ensure that South-South Nigeria can contribute meaningfully to national and international development targets.

The Integrative Social Development & Sustainability (ISODS) Framework represents a transformative approach to poverty reduction in South-South Nigeria. Its emphasis on local relevance, inclusivity, transparency, and sustainability directly addresses the key limitations of past intervention models. By operationalising ISODS, policymakers can move the region from a cycle of resource wealth and persistent poverty to one of equitable development and socio-economic empowerment. For a region as strategically vital yet economically marginalised as the South-South, ISODS offers not just a framework, but a pathway to justice, prosperity, and long-term stability.

Conclusion

The argument that social intervention programmes in Nigeria—including those specifically targeting the South-South region—have failed to stem the rising tide of poverty is both persuasive and well-evidenced. Although these programmes are conceived as solutions to socio-economic challenges, a host of interrelated factors—including entrenched corruption, governance failures, poor programme design, weak implementation, and neglect of the structural roots of poverty—have severely undermined their effectiveness. In the distinctive context of the South-South, the political economy of oil, widespread environmental degradation, and recurrent conflict have created conditions in which intervention funds seldom reach their intended beneficiaries or address the fundamental causes of deprivation.

It is not that social intervention programmes inherently worsen poverty; rather, their repeated failure to meet their objectives—combined with the enormous financial resources they consume, which are often misappropriated—contributes to a scenario where poverty is not only sustained but, in some cases, exacerbated. For Nigeria, and particularly for the South-South region, escaping the cycle of well-intentioned but ineffectual interventions demands a transformative shift. This shift must prioritise transparency, accountability, genuine community engagement, and an unflinching commitment to confronting the deep-seated structural injustices that sustain poverty in a resource-rich land. Without such foundational reforms, social intervention programmes risk remaining costly yet futile endeavours—perpetuating the cruel irony of widespread poverty amid abundant wealth.

Recommendations

The study recommends the need to,

1. Strengthen Programme Design through Context-Specific Approaches

Social intervention policies must be tailored to reflect the unique socio-economic, environmental, and political conditions of the South-South region. Federal programmes should be decentralised and restructured to integrate local inputs, traditional knowledge systems, and context-sensitive development indicators.

2. Establish and Maintain Accurate Social Registries

A robust, transparent, and regularly updated social registry is essential for identifying genuine beneficiaries and reducing elite capture. Community-based verification mechanisms should be incorporated to enhance accuracy and credibility.

3. Promote Transparency and Accountability in Fund Management

Strengthen financial oversight and auditing mechanisms for all social intervention funds. Independent monitoring bodies, civil society organisations, and community representatives should be involved in real-time tracking of fund allocation and utilisation.

4. Enhance Institutional Capacity for Effective Implementation

Government agencies tasked with programme delivery must be adequately staffed, trained, and resourced. Continuous capacity-building initiatives should be implemented to ensure effective coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of intervention schemes.

5. Foster Genuine Community Participation and Ownership

Interventions must actively involve communities not only in implementation but also in planning and evaluation. Participatory models will help ensure that programmes align with actual community needs and encourage local ownership, increasing the chances of sustainability.

6. Integrate Social Interventions with Broader Economic Policies

Social protection efforts should be aligned with wider national economic frameworks such as job creation, rural infrastructure development, environmental restoration, and industrial diversification. This will promote structural transformation and long-term poverty reduction.

7. Address the Structural Drivers of Poverty

Social programmes must move beyond short-term relief and tackle systemic issues such as unequal access to land, environmental degradation, weak education and health systems, and political exclusion. A comprehensive and rights-based approach to development is imperative.

8. Ensure Long-Term Planning and Exit Strategies

Programmes should include clear exit strategies that enable beneficiaries to transition from dependence on social assistance to self-reliant livelihoods. This may involve skills acquisition, entrepreneurship support, and improved access to credit and markets.

9. Depoliticise Social Intervention Programmes

Remove political interference from programme targeting and implementation. Beneficiary selection and programme delivery should be based solely on need and not political allegiance, ethnicity, or regional bias.

10. Reform and Strengthen Institutions like the NDDC

Agencies such as the Niger Delta Development Commission must be comprehensively reformed to eliminate corruption, enhance performance, and refocus on their core mandates. Stronger legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms should guide their operations.

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