

# Nigeria's Underdevelopment and Dependency Theory: A Critical Assessment

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## Abstract

Explaining persistent underdevelopment in resource-rich nations like Nigeria remains a central challenge in development studies. Dependency theory offers a classical framework linking global economic structures to peripheral stagnation. This study critically evaluates the contemporary relevance of dependency theory for understanding Nigeria's development impasse, examining whether it explains structural constraints or serves as a diversion from domestic accountability. The paper synthesizes scholarly literature to analyze the interaction between Nigeria's integration into the global capitalist system and the internal dynamics of its political economy. The analysis reveals a symbiotic relationship between external structural forces and internal agency. While dependency theory accurately describes the vulnerabilities and rentier dynamics arising from Nigeria's peripheral, resource-dependent role, it is insufficient as a primary explanation for its sustained stagnation. The nation's trajectory is decisively shaped by a predatory domestic elite that systematically extracts public resources, perpetuates dependency to maintain rent-seeking opportunities, and strategically employs anti-imperialist rhetoric to obscure internal failures. Nigerian underdevelopment is not a product of either external exploitation or internal failure alone, but of their mutually reinforcing interaction. However, the principal impediment to progress is located in domestic structures of elite predation and institutional decay. Consequently, meaningful change requires a domestic reorientation toward dismantling kleptocracy and building accountable institutions.

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## **Background to the Study**

Nigeria presents one of the most paradoxical and pressing cases of underdevelopment in the global south. As Africa's largest economy and a top oil exporter, it is endowed with vast human and natural capital. Yet, decades after independence, it is home to the world's largest population of people living in extreme poverty, suffers from profound infrastructure deficits, and ranks poorly on nearly every index of human development (World Bank, 2023; UNDP, 2024). This chasm between immense potential and persistent stagnation constitutes a fundamental puzzle that has long animated development scholarship. Understanding its root causes is not merely an academic exercise but a prerequisite for charting any viable path toward national transformation.

The dominant theoretical frameworks used to diagnose this condition have historically fallen into two broads, often opposing, camps. The first, rooted in structuralist and neo-Marxist thought, points to external forces. Dependency theory, for instance, argues that Nigeria's incorporation into the global capitalist system as a raw material exporter has locked it into a subordinate position, creating structural vulnerabilities that perpetuate underdevelopment (Frank, 1967; Rodney, 1972). This perspective highlights the legacies of colonialism, the asymmetries of global trade, and the conditionalities of international financial institutions as the primary architects of Nigeria's constraints. The second camp foregrounds internal dynamics, focusing on the agency and failures of domestic actors. This literature emphasizes the role of a predatory elite, systemic corruption, institutional decay, and a political economy organized around the capture and distribution of oil rents (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Joseph, 1987). Here, the problem is not the global cage, but the character of its domestic keepers.

While both perspectives offer valuable insights, their polarization has led to a theoretical and analytical impasse. This paper argues that the enduring power of this debate stems from a critical blind spot: the dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship between external structures and internal agency. It is in this interaction that we find the most compelling explanation for Nigeria's predicament. Specifically, the persistent invocation of dependency theory, while analytically useful for mapping structural constraints, has increasingly functioned as an intellectual alibi. It provides a convenient narrative for a domestic elite seeking to deflect accountability for its own profound governance failures, thereby perpetuating the very system of predation that blocks development.

To move beyond this theoretical stalemate, this study conducts a critical synthesis of scholarly literature to interrogate the contemporary relevance of dependency theory in the Nigerian context. It seeks to answer a central research question: Is Nigeria's underdevelopment primarily a consequence of its dependent position in the global system, or is it principally a product of domestic elite predation that exploits and reinforces that dependency? More pointedly, has dependency theory transitioned from a valid analytical tool into a strategic narrative of exoneration?

To address this question, the paper is structured as follows. First, it examines the historical and structural arguments of dependency theory as applied to Nigeria, assessing their explanatory power regarding the country's contemporary constraints. Second, it shifts focus to the domestic arena, analyzing the agency of the elite through the concepts of rent-seeking, corruption, and institutional decay. Third, it synthesizes these two lines of inquiry to propose a symbiotic model where external vulnerabilities and internal predation are mutually reinforcing. The paper concludes by evaluating the hierarchy of causation and arguing that while the dependency framework accurately describes the structure of Nigeria's challenges, the principal impediment to progress is the domestic political economy of elite failure. Consequently, the path forward lies not in awaiting a restructuring of the global order, but in the arduous domestic work of building accountable institutions and dismantling kleptocracy.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in documentary analysis and a critical literature review to examine the complex interplay between structural dependency and elite agency in Nigeria's underdevelopment. The methodological approach is guided by the need to adjudicate between competing theoretical explanations through rigorous textual and contextual analysis of secondary sources. It employs a triangulated analytical framework that incorporates historical, conceptual, and discursive lenses to ensure a comprehensive and critical examination.

The methodology proceeds in three integrated phases:

#### **1. Historical-Structural Analysis:**

This phase addresses the research objective concerning historical trajectories and global structures. It involves a systematic review of historical documents, economic data, and scholarly works to trace the evolution of Nigeria's integration into the global economy. The analysis focuses on identifying continuities and shifts in the mechanisms of dependency, from colonial-era extraction to post-colonial trade relations, debt dynamics, and the conditionalities of international financial institutions. This historical lens is crucial for assessing the persistence and form of external structural constraints.

#### **2. Conceptual-Thematic Analysis:**

This phase corresponds to the objectives of evaluating elite failure and examining policy outcomes. A systematic review and thematic synthesis of academic literature, policy documents, and credible reports (e.g., from the World Bank, IMF, and Nigerian government agencies) is conducted. The analysis identifies, codes, and interprets recurring themes related to governance models, corruption patterns, rent-seeking behaviours, and the implementation (or failure) of infrastructure and social policies. This allows for a structured assessment of the internal political economy and its tangible impacts, moving beyond theoretical claims to documented evidence of elite agency.

#### **3. Critical Discursive Analysis:**

This final, synthesizing phase directly engages the core research problem of explanatory

hierarchy and theoretical validity. It applies a critical discourse analysis to scholarly and policy texts that employ dependency theory and/or elite failure arguments. This involves scrutinizing the language, framing, and underlying assumptions within these texts to investigate *how* each theory is deployed. The aim is to discern whether discussions of dependency function as a structural analysis or, alternatively, as a narrative strategy that deflects agency and accountability. This meta-analysis is key to determining if dependency theory retains robust explanatory power or has been instrumentalized as an intellectual alibi. By synthesizing findings from these three analytical streams, the study employs methodological triangulation to construct a nuanced, evidence-based argument. This approach does not merely summarize existing literature but actively critiques, compares, and synthesizes disparate sources to build a logical inference about the primary drivers of underdevelopment in Nigeria, thereby fulfilling the overarching aim of the research.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Dependency Theory**

Dependency theory, as a critical perspective on global political economy, posits that the underdevelopment of certain nations is not merely a stage in an evolutionary process but is actively perpetuated by their integration into the global capitalist system, primarily through historical colonial relationships and contemporary unequal trade structures. This framework suggests that peripheral countries, like Nigeria, become economically dependent on core developed nations, leading to the extraction of their resources and surplus value, which ultimately hinders their indigenous development (Abdulrazaq, 2025). This unequal exchange perpetuates a cycle of reliance, where the economic structures of dependent nations are molded to serve the interests of the dominant core, thereby stifling genuine industrialization and self-sufficient growth. Key proponents such as André Gunder Frank and Fernando Henrique Cardoso emphasized that this dependency is not merely external but is also internalized through local elite complicity, where domestic ruling classes benefit from maintaining the existing global economic order.

This dynamic ensures that any economic growth experienced in peripheral nations primarily serves to deepen their dependence rather than fostering genuine, autonomous development. Therefore, understanding this theoretical underpinning is crucial for analyzing how Nigeria's economic policies and internal structures might be influenced by external forces, contributing to persistent underdevelopment despite abundant resources (Joy et al., 2021). The theory further contends that development in the periphery is directly conditioned by the development of the core, meaning that the former's economic expansion is often constrained by the latter's demand and technological superiority. Moreover, dependency theory fundamentally challenges modernization theory, which posits that all societies follow a similar developmental path, by arguing that the historical integration of underdeveloped countries into the global system has created unique structural impediments to their progress (Igbokwe, 2020).

This perspective highlights how the global capitalist system fosters an asymmetrical, hierarchical international division of labor, in which developed nations exploit less-developed nations, leading to what Gunder Frank termed "the development of underdevelopment" (Ogbonna, 2021; Udeala, 2010). This perpetual cycle of exploitation is further exacerbated by mechanisms such as unequal exchange, in which the value of labor inputs from developing countries is systematically undervalued in international trade relative to those from developed nations, thereby transferring wealth from the periphery to the core (Udeala, 2010).

This continuous transfer of economic surplus from the satellite to the metropolis, as conceptualized by Wallerstein, ensures that the development of wealthy nations and the underdevelopment of poor nations are two inextricably linked phenomena (Thovoethin & Ewalefoh, 2019). This metropolis-satellite chain, in which surplus generated in the periphery is siphoned off by the core, leads to the impoverishment of the former and the enrichment of the latter, as argued by scholars such as Baran (Udeala, 2010). This historical context is crucial for understanding how Nigeria's present-day economic landscape might still bear the imprints of colonial exploitation and post-colonial integration into the global economy (Adewole & Ogunrinu, 2019).

Furthermore, dependency theory elucidates how reliance on foreign capital, technology, and markets can inhibit the growth of indigenous industries and foster a situation in which national policies prioritize external demands over internal developmental needs. This structural imbalance ultimately results in the stagnation of the peripheral economy, creating affluence in the core while perpetuating impoverishment in the periphery (Ogbonna, 2021). Consequently, dependency theory underscores the importance of examining the historical dimensions of economic relations, particularly how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary global economic structures and power dynamics (Kuran, 2024; Malek, 2024). It also critically examines how globalization, rather than alleviating underdevelopment, can exacerbate it through increased trade liberalization, foreign investment, and technological advancements, perpetuating an uneven distribution of benefits within the global capitalist economy (Letswa et al., 2018; Tukon, 2024).

A key tenet of dependency theory is that the economic infrastructure within peripheral nations is often disarticulated, meaning that growth in one sector does not stimulate growth in others, as the proceeds disproportionately benefit a small elite and their advanced capitalist partners (Ogbonna, 2021). This often leads to a situation in which peripheral economies specialize in raw material exports, with little diversification, and infrastructure is built to serve export sectors rather than to integrate the domestic economy (Anees et al., 2025). This structural distortion further entrenches economic dependence and contributes to persistent poverty despite potential resource wealth, as observed in Nigeria's case, where high GDP coexists with widespread poverty and low human development (Ogbonna, 2021). This framework also highlights how global commodity chains and the transfer of advanced technologies from core to peripheral

nations can create a technological dependency, further hindering autonomous industrial development and economic diversification.

These unequal exchanges, in which core countries exploit the periphery's valuable raw materials and cheap labor while selling processed commodities back to it, exemplify a persistent dynamic, particularly evident in nations such as Nigeria (Kuran, 2024). This often results in a perpetual cycle of external borrowing and debt accumulation, in which peripheral nations incur "dead-weight" debts that further burden future generations and misallocate resources from productive investments (Chiadika & Egbon, 2024). The implications of this dependency are profound, limiting a nation's ability to develop robust domestic industries, foster innovation, and achieve sustainable economic growth independent of external influence. In contrast, some scholars propose that public infrastructure investments, particularly in health services, can significantly enhance labor productivity, thereby laying a crucial foundation for economic growth (Ebehung & Ogar, 2025).

### **Critiques and Alternative Perspectives**

However, dependency theory has faced considerable scrutiny for its perceived overemphasis on external factors and its alleged neglect of internal governance issues and domestic policy failures as primary drivers of underdevelopment (Kvangraven, 2023). Critics argue that an excessive focus on external determinants risks portraying developing nations as passive recipients of global forces, thereby absolving domestic elites of accountability for economic mismanagement, corruption, and institutional weaknesses that actively impede progress (Tukon, 2024). This perspective suggests that dependency theory can, at times, serve as an intellectual excuse, diverting attention from critical internal issues that hinder a nation's development (Onyeiwu & Abimbola, 2018).

Furthermore, such criticisms contend that by focusing predominantly on historical injustices and global power structures, the theory often overlooks the agency of developing countries to pursue alternative development paths and implement effective domestic policies. This critique highlights the importance of endogenous factors, such as government effectiveness, policy formulation, and institutional quality, in shaping development outcomes, even within a globalized economic system (Akaegbobi & Nwosu, 2025). Moreover, alternative perspectives emphasize that sustained economic growth often hinges on the presence of robust institutions, adherence to the rule of law, and the implementation of sound macroeconomic policies that foster a conducive environment for domestic investment and innovation (Igbokwe, 2020). This is particularly evident in the endogenous growth theory, which posits that economic growth is primarily driven by internal mechanisms such as human capital accumulation, infrastructure development, and technological progress, rather than solely by external factors (Ebehung & Ogar, 2025; Olaoye, 2023).

Conversely, post-development theory offers a distinct critique, asserting that Western formal political and economic institutions, when imposed without consideration for

local contexts, can actively hinder rather than foster development (Elagin, 2021). This perspective critiques the universal applicability of Western development models and highlights the importance of culturally sensitive approaches that respect local knowledge and socio-political structures (Dobson & Nicholson, 2018). In Nigeria, a critical assessment reveals that pervasive corruption and inefficient capital allocation have significantly undermined the potential benefits of capital formation and infrastructure investments, regardless of their origin (Ebehung & Ogar, 2025). This perspective aligns with arguments that highlight internal challenges such as a lack of close integration, poor institutional frameworks, and mismanagement as key drivers of underdevelopment, rather than solely external forces (Onyeiwu & Abimbola, 2018). These internal factors, including policy inconsistencies and overreliance on oil revenues, have contributed to Nigeria's infrastructure deficits, which are well below global benchmarks and significantly hinder sustainable economic growth and diversification (Ebehung & Ogar, 2025). Such internal issues also include a "monocultural export" economy, a substantial debt burden, and an inability to attract significant foreign investment, further illustrating that globalization has not benefited Nigeria as much as it could have (Omoyele et al., 2021). Indeed, the substantial increase in Nigeria's external debt, combined with inadequate internal capital formation stemming from low productivity and savings, further exacerbates its economic vulnerabilities (Okutimiren et al., 2024). This complex interplay of internal and external factors underscores the necessity of a nuanced approach to understanding Nigeria's underdevelopment, moving beyond monocausal explanations to embrace a multi-faceted analysis (Akaegbobi & Nwosu, 2025; Chiadika & Egbon, 2024).

## **Literature Review**

### **Historical Context of Nigeria's Underdevelopment**

Nigeria's underdevelopment is deeply rooted in its colonial past, which established extractive economic structures and integrated the region into the global capitalist system in a subordinate role, thereby laying the groundwork for many of the challenges it faces today. The imposition of artificial borders, the exploitation of natural resources, and the distortion of indigenous socio-economic systems during colonialism created a legacy of structural imbalances and dependencies that continue to impede sustainable development in the post-independence era. This historical trajectory initiated a "monocultural export" economy, predominantly centered on crude oil, which has fostered an overreliance on a single commodity and neglected diversification (Osho, 2025). This reliance has made Nigeria highly vulnerable to global commodity price fluctuations and has stifled the development of other sectors, leading to a phenomenon often described as the "resource curse" (Ogbeide et al., 2015). This overreliance on oil can undermine positive economic effects and lead to uneven distribution of wealth, further exacerbating underdevelopment by neglecting non-oil sectors (Adeyemi et al., 2024).

Resource curse theory specifically addresses the challenges and risks associated with oil-dependent economies such as Nigeria, offering a comprehensive framework for analyzing the political and economic ramifications of such dependence (Adeyemi et al.,

2024). The perpetuation of this structure, even after independence, is often attributed to both external forces that maintain the global economic order and internal elite interests that benefit from the existing system, thereby further entrenching the nation's dependency (Etsemitan & Obriki, 2023). This persistent economic arrangement, characterized by systematic unequal exchange, was firmly entrenched even before Nigeria gained independence from Great Britain, with Western multinational corporations dictating the structure of the colonial Nigerian economy primarily to serve British interests (Umezurike et al., 2017). This historical context underscores that Nigeria inherited a "hostage economy" from the British colonial regime, characterized by an industrial infrastructure and economic sectors skewed toward meeting external needs and facilitating the export of raw materials in exchange for finished goods (Effiom et al., 2021).

The colonial administration deliberately suppressed the development of Nigeria's industrial base, fostering light industries solely for processing agricultural produce for export rather than promoting comprehensive industrial growth (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2019). This legacy of economic subordination, therefore, continued into the post-colonial era, perpetuating a cycle of dependency where Nigeria's economic structure remained largely externally oriented and susceptible to the demands of developed nations (Umezurike et al., 2017). This historical economic subjugation led to an enclave economy designed to extract raw materials for value addition elsewhere, thereby failing to address Nigeria's fundamental needs, such as food security (Okeke & Nwali, 2020). The oil boom of the 1970s further exacerbated this situation, shifting focus from agricultural investment to petroleum extraction, thereby hindering the transition to sustainable, large-scale commercial agriculture. This pivot dramatically altered Nigeria's economic landscape, transforming it from a net exporter of agricultural products into a net importer of food items by the 1980s, a condition that persists despite various government strategies to improve trade balances (Laville, 2021). This shift, coupled with an increased reliance on oil revenues, diminished the political will to invest in agricultural infrastructure and rural development, thereby undermining the sector's potential to drive inclusive growth and food security (Shafiu & Salleh, 2021). This redirection of economic focus led to a decline in agricultural productivity and self-sufficiency, a stark contrast to the pre-oil boom era when agriculture accounted for over 90% of Nigeria's GDP and ensured food security for the nation (Lokpobiri, 2019).

However, this economic structure, heavily reliant on a single commodity, has resulted in chronic food shortages and increased dependence on foreign supplies, demonstrating a fundamental flaw in the inherited economic system (Effiom et al., 2021; Jacob, 2023). The shift away from agriculture significantly affected the livelihoods of smallholder farmers and contributed to rural poverty, as government expenditure on agriculture, once a major driver of economic growth, declined substantially (Joseph et al., 2024; Olugbire et al., 2021). This decline was further compounded by policies that prioritized urban development over rural areas, resulting in significant disparities in resource allocation and exacerbating the rural-urban divide (Agnes, 2016). This has contributed to a cycle of

underdevelopment, where the nation's economic progress is hindered by its inability to adequately feed its growing population, necessitating substantial food imports (Jacob, 2023). This historical trajectory showcases how external economic integration, coupled with internal policy choices, created and reinforced a structure of dependency, ultimately stifling Nigeria's potential for diversified and self-reliant development (2018; Diao & Thurlow, 2008). The economic policies enacted during the Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1980s, influenced by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, further entrenched Nigeria's external dependency by promoting austerity measures, market liberalization, and public sector downsizing, transforming healthcare into a commodity and neglecting social welfare. These structural adjustments often led to reduced government spending on critical sectors such as health and education, thereby weakening public services and disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. Furthermore, these neoliberal reforms, driven by a commodification of public services, exacerbated existing structural inequalities within Nigeria's political economy, particularly through the commercialization of healthcare.

### **Dependency Theory's Application to Nigeria**

The theoretical underpinnings of dependency theory therefore provide a robust framework for analyzing Nigeria's ongoing economic challenges and the systemic issues that impede its development. This perspective highlights how Nigeria's integration into the global capitalist system has historically positioned it as a peripheral state, primarily serving the economic interests of core developed nations (Ungwa & Ker, 2025). This structural imbalance perpetuates an extractive economic model, limiting the nation's capacity for genuine industrialization and self-sufficient growth (Trienekens, 2012). The historical trajectory of Nigeria's political economy, from its colonial origins to post-colonial adjustments, demonstrates how external forces and internal elite decisions have consistently maintained this dependent status, obstructing the development of robust internal linkages within the economy and fostering an urban-rural dichotomy (Agnes, 2016).

This results in local production being disarticulated from local consumption patterns, thereby creating reliance on imports of essential goods even as raw materials are exported (Jack, 2016). This inherent disarticulation contributes to a persistent trade imbalance and stifles the emergence of a diversified industrial base, further entrenching Nigeria's position within the global economic hierarchy (Effiom et al., 2021). This dependency is further evidenced by the continued influence of foreign aid and international loans, which often come with conditions that prioritize donor interests over Nigeria's sustainable development objectives, thereby perpetuating cycles of underdevelopment and hindering the establishment of self-sustaining industries (Prince et al., 2023).

This framework posits that the exploitation of natural resources by multinational corporations in countries such as Nigeria leads to a "petro-bourgeoisie" class that prioritizes the appropriation of oil wealth, thereby exacerbating social contradictions

and unequal power relations at both the state-society and local-global levels (Okpaleke & Abraham-Dukuma, 2020). These dynamics are further complicated by the rentier nature of the Nigerian state, in which political power is often tied to the control and distribution of resource wealth rather than to productive economic activity, thereby impeding democratic accountability and fostering corruption (Ogbonna, 2021).

This theoretical lens is particularly relevant given Nigeria's historical role as a supplier of raw materials to industrialized nations, a pattern that continues with its reliance on crude oil exports (Rapanyane & Shai, 2023). This reliance on a single commodity for export revenue has made the Nigerian economy highly susceptible to global market fluctuations, hindering long-term economic planning and diversification efforts (Joseph et al., 2024). Despite possessing abundant natural resources, Nigeria has largely missed opportunities to diversify its economy and decouple from its dependency on oil, exemplifying the core tenets of dependency theory (Ichime et al., 2024). The continued dominance of primary commodity exports and the limited development of indigenous manufacturing capabilities underscore how external economic forces constrain internal development pathways. This perpetual cycle reinforces the argument that dependency theory remains a salient framework for understanding Nigeria's persistent underdevelopment, as it elucidates how global economic structures limit the nation's capacity for autonomous growth (Halidu & Atnadu, 2022).

The theory also elucidates how the repatriation of profits by foreign firms and the complicity of local elites contribute to the sustained outflow of capital, thereby limiting domestic investment and capital accumulation in Nigeria (Halidu & Atnadu, 2022). This outflow is often compounded by inadequate government expenditure management and a lack of transparency in resource allocation, further hindering sustainable development (Akaegbobi & Nwosu, 2025; Oluwaniyi, 2018). Multinational corporations, particularly in the oil sector, play a significant role in perpetuating neo-colonialism by operating as instruments of exploitation, extracting substantial revenues while contributing minimally to the development of host communities and often influencing policies in their favor (Tukon, 2024; Yange, 2024). This dynamic often results in a "resource curse," in which rich natural resources become a detriment rather than a benefit due to mismanagement by both multinational corporations and local elites, leading to weak economic performance and socioeconomic stagnation (Williams et al., 2023).

This structural dynamic is evident in Nigeria's oil industry, where multinational corporations have historically dominated the extraction and export of oil, contributing to substantial foreign revenue but often at the expense of environmental degradation and limited local content development (Oluwaniyi, 2018). This perpetuates a cycle where the economic benefits are externalized, while the environmental and social costs are internalized, exacerbating underdevelopment in the Niger Delta region despite significant oil revenues (Yange, 2024). Furthermore, these multinational corporations engage in complex inter-industry relationships and joint ventures that often secure competitive advantages over domestic firms, further entrenching their market

dominance. This enables them to influence economic policies and regulatory frameworks to their benefit, thereby sustaining the unequal exchange inherent in the global capitalist system (Alshaar, 2025; Ogbonna, 2021).

### **Elite Failure and Governance in Nigeria**

A critical assessment of elite behavior reveals that, in collusion with transnational agents, Nigerian politicians often exploit national resources, sharing the spoils with foreign corporations and employing tactics such as raising oil prices to shift the economic burden onto the populace, leading to widespread hardship and poverty (Ogbonna, 2021). This pervasive corruption and self-serving governance impede the development of critical infrastructure and social services, diverting funds that could otherwise foster economic diversification and improve living standards for the majority of the population (Abdullaziz, 2025; Williams et al., 2023). This often results in extensive government expenditure across sectors failing to translate into tangible improvements due to inefficiency, resource misallocation, and a lack of accountability (Akaegbobi & Nwosu, 2025; Ibenu & Nwankwo, 2025).

This systematic failure to translate resource wealth into public goods creates a significant gap between political expectations and opportunities for the citizenry, fostering an environment in which grievances can escalate into insurgency. Moreover, the relentless pursuit of power and personal interests by Nigeria's political elites obstructs effective governance and the provision of essential services, leading to pervasive corruption and a notable absence of accountability (Oludele & Omosat, 2023). This elite-driven corruption, often shielded by political patronage, significantly hinders policy implementation and perpetuates a disconnect between governmental intentions and actual outcomes. This systemic corruption is further exacerbated by weak institutions, which are often manipulated by the ruling class to maintain their grip on power and access to resources, thereby undermining the rule of law and democratic principles (C.J.S. et al., 2021; Ebehung & Ogar, 2025).

Such practices demonstrate how a privileged minority, possessing leadership skills and access to crucial knowledge, actively orchestrates policy agendas and manipulates political systems for personal gain rather than national development (Odusanya, 2023; Oghuvbu, 2021). This systemic exploitation by the elite undermines public trust and significantly erodes the state's capacity to deliver essential public goods and services (Williams et al., 2019). This confluence of elite corruption and institutional weakness creates a "paradox of plenty," where Nigeria's substantial oil revenues do not translate into improved living conditions or robust infrastructure for its citizens, but instead fuel illicit financial flows and personal enrichment (Abdullaziz, 2025; Moyo, 2012). This persistent mismanagement and corruption have systematically eroded public trust in governmental institutions and their capacity to deliver basic services, contributing to systemic exclusion and structural inequality among the populace.

### **Contemporary Development Challenges**

The inability of successive governments to translate Nigeria's vast natural and human resources into tangible improvements in citizens' living conditions has led to widespread disillusionment and a perception of state failure, exacerbated by endemic corruption and a lack of accountability. This has resulted in a pervasive sense of inequality and injustice, contributing to social unrest and insecurity nationwide (Abdullaziz, 2025). These challenges are often intensified by a phenomenon termed "political elitism," in which a small group of individuals monopolizes power and resources, thereby further entrenching inequalities and hindering inclusive governance, which is crucial for sustainable development (Bolarinwa & Osuji, 2022). The consistent failure to address deplorable living conditions and lack of economic opportunities, particularly in marginalized regions, creates a fertile ground for conflict and instability.

Consequently, the state's retreat from its responsibilities, coupled with an economic downturn, has fostered an environment in which a small, conspicuous, consumption-driven elite thrives at the expense of the majority. This environment fosters systematic exclusion and structural inequality among the populace, leading to higher crime rates and insecurity (Abdullaziz, 2025). This widespread poverty and perceived lack of basic security fuels grievances, making individuals susceptible to recruitment by criminal and extremist groups, as seen with the rise of Boko Haram (Chen et al., 2020). This "paradox of plenty," in which significant oil revenues coexist with widespread poverty and underdevelopment, highlights the detrimental effects of corruption and mismanagement on national development (Abdullaziz, 2025; Monclos, 2016).

Such conditions are further exacerbated by the inability to foster societal values such as trust, cooperation, and justice, which are fundamental for sustainable development and effective resource management (Ujomu, 2018). The pervasive material inequalities and the resultant sense of unfairness among the populace are significant root causes of insecurity, fostering an environment in which criminal activities flourish, and the security of lives and property cannot be guaranteed (Abdullaziz, 2025). This pervasive insecurity stems from a complex interplay of factors, including persistent corruption, state fragility, and a widening gap between citizens' expectations and the government's capacity to deliver essential services (Chen et al., 2020). The disconnect between the government and its citizens further exacerbates this instability, fostering mistrust and resentment that hinder collective action toward national development (Austin-Egole et al., 2022).

This political elitism and the attendant concentration of wealth within a small segment of society, while the majority grapples with poverty, contribute to deep-seated resentments and class conflicts. This dynamic, in turn, fuels social unrest and violence, contributing to a cycle of underdevelopment where systemic inequalities are perpetuated by those in power (Nweke, 2011). The psychological theory of frustration-aggression posits that sustained frustration stemming from unfulfilled goals and unmet basic needs can invariably lead to aggressive behavior, thereby directly linking elite-driven corruption

and inequality to surges in criminal activity and widespread insecurity across Nigeria (Chen et al., 2020). This frustration, compounded by feelings of exclusion and envy among marginalized communities, often drives individuals towards rebellion and anti-social activities, further exacerbating the cycle of violence and instability. The breakdown of institutional infrastructures, coupled with pervasive corruption and a lack of accountability, further weakens the state's capacity to maintain law and order, creating a vacuum that criminal and extremist groups readily exploit (Abdullaziz, 2025). This environment of systemic blockage of opportunities, especially for professional and technical skills, resonates with Cloward and Ohlin's Opportunity Theory, suggesting that those who engage in violence for utilitarian purposes often do so due to perceived discriminatory systemic barriers.

## **Research Analysis**

### **Evaluating Dependency Theory vs. Elite Failure in Nigeria's Underdevelopment**

The question of whether dependency theory remains a valid explanation for Nigeria's underdevelopment, or has instead morphed into an intellectual excuse for elite failure, requires a critical dissection of both frameworks. The evidence suggests that while dependency theory provides an essential structural context, it has been critically instrumentalized and superseded by the agency of a predatory domestic elite. Thus, it is less than dependency theory is invalid, and more that it has been rendered a secondary, enabling condition rather than the primary, active driver of contemporary stagnation.

#### **1. The Persistent Validity of Dependency Theory: Structural Constraints**

Dependency theory retains explanatory power in diagnosing Nigeria's position within the global economic hierarchy.

**Primary Commodity Trap:** Nigeria's economy remains archetypically dependent on crude oil exports, a classic "peripheral" role. This creates vulnerability to volatile global prices, stifles diversification, and concentrates wealth in a narrow, easily captured sector. The "resource curse" is a direct manifestation of dependent integration.

**Asymmetrical Power Relations:** The structural adjustments of the 1980s/90s, imposed by international financial institutions, eroded policy autonomy, dismantled nascent industries, and prioritized debt servicing over social investment. This historical episode validates dependency theory's claim that external actors can enforce policies that perpetuate underdevelopment.

**Neo-Colonial Dynamics:** Conditions attached to international aid and investment can undermine sovereignty, as noted by Yadima (2025). Furthermore, multinational corporations, while bringing capital, often engage in practices from profit repatriation to limited technology transfer that can reinforce extractive, rather than transformative, economic relationships. In this sense, dependency theory correctly identifies the global playground on which Nigeria's development game is played, one with tilted rules and historical disadvantages.

## 2. Dependency Theory as an Intellectual Alibi: The Primacy of Elite Agency

However, to blame Nigeria's *persistent and deepening* underdevelopment primarily on these external structures is to overlook the decisive agentic role of Nigeria's political and economic elite. Here, dependency theory risks becoming a convenient scapegoat.

**From Constraint to Opportunity:** The rentier oil economy, a dependency structure, did not *compel* corruption and mismanagement; it enabled it. The elite transformed a structural vulnerability into a system of personal enrichment. As Omilusi (2018) suggests, elites actively perpetuate dependency because it suits their interests, facilitating rent-seeking over productive investment.

**Comparative Evidence:** Nations with similar historical dependency trajectories (e.g., Indonesia, Malaysia, Botswana) have achieved significant developmental progress through coherent industrial policy, investment in human capital, and corruption control. This demonstrates that while dependency poses challenges, it is not an immutable fate. Nigeria's failure to follow similar paths points directly to internal governance failures.

**Elite Collusion and Capital Flight:** The quintessential act of elite failure is the massive transfer of national wealth abroad, estimated in the hundreds of billions of dollars. This is not a symptom of dependency but of predatory autonomy. The elite consciously choose to invest stolen assets in the very "core" economies, thereby revealing, through dependency theory critiques, a parasitic relationship with both their nation and the global system.

**Policy Volition:** Nigeria has consistently failed to implement coherent, long-term policies for agricultural revival, education, or infrastructure areas, largely within domestic control. The misallocation of resources, such as negligible agricultural spending (Chiadika & Egbon, 2024), is a direct result of elite priorities rather than external dictates. Therefore, wielding dependency theory as the *primary* explanation today often sounds like an intellectual excuse a way for the elite and their apologists to deflect blame from decades of catastrophic governance, rampant corruption, and a conscious choice to privatize public wealth.

## 3. A Synthetic and More Compelling Explanation: The Interplay Thesis

The most accurate analysis moves beyond this binary, adopting the synthetic perspective suggested by the research. It is a mutually reinforcing dialectic:

- i. **Dependency creates the form:** It establishes a resource-dependent, externally vulnerable economic structure with concentrated revenue flows.
- ii. **Elite failure determines the outcome:** A capture-prone elite seizes this structure, not to mitigate its risks or diversify away from it, but to exploit it for personal gain, thereby intensifying its negative effects. They become the *domestic administrators* of Nigeria's peripheral status. In this model, external dependency is the precondition, but internal elite failure is the proximate and sufficient cause of ongoing underdevelopment. The "cycle" described by Chen et al. (2020) is

precisely this: a dependent economy empowers a corrupt elite; whose corruption deepens the dependency.

This analysis has critically evaluated the competing explanations for Nigeria's persistent underdevelopment, interrogating whether it is primarily dictated by external structures of global dependency or by internal failures of governance and elite predation. The investigation reveals that while the structural constraints highlighted by dependency theory, such as a rentier oil economy and asymmetrical global integration, create a vulnerable foundation, they do not alone determine the outcome. Instead, Nigeria's trajectory has been decisively shaped by the agency of a domestic elite that systematically converts national resources into private wealth. Consequently, the frequent invocation of dependency theory often functions less as a rigorous diagnosis and more as an intellectual alibi, deflecting accountability from the proximate causes of mismanagement, corruption, and the deliberate sabotage of developmental institutions. The evidence indicates a mutually reinforcing dynamic: external dependencies create opportunities for elite capture, while a predatory elite actively perpetuates those dependencies to sustain a lucrative status quo of rent-seeking and capital flight. Therefore, a holistic understanding must synthesize both frameworks. Nigeria's underdevelopment is not a simple choice between external exploitation and internal failure, but the product of their symbiotic interaction. The fundamental impediment to progress, however, lies not in an immutable global order but in the domestic political economy of elite predation. Lasting development will consequently depend less on awaiting a benevolent international system and more on the arduous internal work of dismantling kleptocratic structures and fostering a transformative, accountable political elite

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to critically evaluate the explanatory power of dependency theory in the context of Nigeria's persistent underdevelopment, moving beyond a polarized debate to examine the interplay between global structures and domestic agency. The central purpose was to determine whether dependency theory remains a valid analytical framework or has, over time, been instrumentalized as an intellectual alibi for elite failure. The analysis synthesized scholarly literature to probe this relationship, focusing on the historical and contemporary dynamics of Nigeria's political economy.

The key findings of this investigation reveal that Nigeria's developmental impasse cannot be adequately explained by either external constraints or internal failures in isolation. Instead, it is the product of their symbiotic and mutually reinforcing interaction. The dependency framework remains essential for contextualizing the structural vulnerabilities inherited from colonialism and perpetuated through Nigeria's peripheral, rentier role in the global economy. This structure created the opportunity: a resource-rich state with concentrated, easily captured revenues. However, the analysis demonstrates that the decisive factor in perpetuating stagnation has been the strategic agency of a predatory domestic elite. This elite has not merely been a passive victim of

global forces; it has actively exploited the dependency structure, converting public resources into private wealth, sabotaging institutional development, and perpetuating a system of rent-seeking that deepens the nation's vulnerabilities. Crucially, the elite has strategically deployed the rhetoric of external exploitation to deflect accountability, thereby transforming a once-critical analytical tool into a convenient narrative of exoneration.

This study makes a significant contribution to knowledge by moving beyond a theoretical stalemate to propose a hierarchical synthesis. It affirms that while dependency theory remains a valuable diagnostic for understanding the *structure* of Nigeria's global position, it is insufficient as a primary explanation for its contemporary crisis. The principal impediment to progress is located decisively within the domestic sphere: in the character of the elite, the decay of institutions, and the consequent failure of governance. This finding reframes the development challenge, shifting the locus of responsibility and action from the distant global order to the immediate arena of national politics.

The practical implications of this conclusion are profound. A path forward predicated on awaiting a fundamental restructuring of the global capitalist system is a prescription for perpetual stasis. Instead, this analysis suggests that sustainable development must emerge from arduous, deliberate, and internally driven transformation. This requires a fundamental reorientation of national priorities away from the management of dependency and toward the dismantling of its domestic enablers. While this study provides a robust theoretical synthesis, its reliance on existing literature points to a clear avenue for future research. Subsequent investigations should move beyond theoretical critique to empirically trace the specific mechanisms of the dependency-elite nexus. Future research could, for example, conduct in-depth case studies of particular policy failures (e.g., in power sector reform or industrial policy), trace the financial flows from oil revenues to elite holdings, or employ comparative analysis with resource-rich nations that have successfully navigated similar structural constraints. Such empirical work would further illuminate the precise pathways through which elite agency translates structural vulnerability into national stagnation. In the final analysis, Nigeria's underdevelopment is not an inescapable fate dictated by global forces, but a political outcome sustained by domestic choices. The cage of dependency is real, but its locks are forged and fastened from within. The task of national renewal, therefore, lies not in a quixotic quest to dismantle the global system, but in the painstaking, sovereign work of transforming the domestic political economy that keeps the cage door closed

### **Recommendations**

Based on the critical synthesis that identifies elite predation as the proximate cause of underdevelopment within a permissive global structure, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

#### **1. Dismantle Elite Capture through Institutional Reforms with Enforced Accountability.**

Implement and empower independent anti-corruption institutions with prosecutorial

autonomy, protected funding, and mandatory transparency in all government procurement and contracting. This must be coupled with stringent asset declarations and lifestyle audits for public officials to disrupt the cycle of rent-seeking and ensure that public funds are channeled into national development rather than private enrichment.

## **2. Transform Human Capital Investment with Ring-fenced, Performance-Based Funding.**

Substantially increase and legally ring-fence budgetary allocations to education and healthcare, linking disbursements to independently verified performance metrics in service delivery and infrastructure outcomes. This approach should explicitly target the reduction of structural inequities (urban bias, regional marginalization) to ensure investments translate into tangible human capital development for all citizens.

## **3. Engineer Economic Diversification via Strategic Infrastructure and Industrial Policy.**

Launch a coordinated national infrastructure program (prioritizing power and logistics) funded through transparent public-private partnerships and recovered assets. This should be integrated with a targeted industrial policy that provides incentives for non-oil sectors (agro-processing, renewable energy technologies) and mandates technology transfer and local content requirements in foreign investments to build a resilient, value-adding, productive base.

## **4. Foster a Culture of Civic Accountability and Political Consequence.**

Promote legislation that guarantees and protects civic space, enabling robust media freedom and civil society oversight of government expenditure and policy implementation. Establish clear electoral and legal mechanisms to hold political leadership directly accountable for developmental outcomes, shifting the political cost-benefit analysis from personal accumulation to public service.

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