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Sustainable Development Governance in Nigeria: From Global Environmental Commitments to Domestic Policy Implementation

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Abstract

Nigeria has gradually integrated its national development and environmental governance frameworks with the most salient international agreements on sustainable development, such as the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. But the degree of effective implementation of these commitments at the domestic level has been challenged. This study compares Nigeria's international commitments on sustainable development and policy implementation on sustainable development at the national level with emphasis on policy implementation gaps. The study is qualitative and documentary research, which is limited to secondary data from the following policy and legal documents of the country, national development plans, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) reports, Voluntary National Reviews, climate-policy instruments, and relevant peer-reviewed literature and international policy reports. Data were analysed thematically around five dimensions of implementation: policy alignment, institutional coordination, financing and resource mobilisation, monitoring and accountability, and subnational localisation. The results show that Nigeria has relatively well formalised linkages between international commitments and domestic policy frameworks such as SDG Implementation Plan 2020-2030, Nationally Determined Contributions, Climate Change Act 2021 and environmental policies. However, significant implementation challenges remain in inter-institutional coordination, financing, policy coherence, accountability and subnational capacity. The performance on implementation of the SDGs is also uneven, as evidenced based on Nigeria's 2025 Third Voluntary National Review, where 34.6% of the assessed SDG indicators improved, 30.8% remained the same, and 34.6% worsened. The study findings show that the implementation-governance gap is becoming an emerging challenge of sustainable development in Nigeria rather than policy commitments. It suggests increased policy coordination across all levels of government, tying public spending to sustainability goals, better financing of the climate and environment, addressing accountability for corrective action through monitoring, building capacity at subnational level to implement policy, and consolidating existing policies instead of creating new ones. The study builds on the literature of "sustainable-development governance" by providing a case study for the need to look at institutional and policy mechanisms that attempt to make global sustainable-development commitments concrete in a developing-country setting.

Keywords: *Sustainable Development, Global Environmental Commitments and Domestic Policy*

	Implementation.

Introduction

Sustainable development has transitioned from a general and vague aim to a key framework for structuring modern-day global governance, especially to tackle the interrelated crises of environmental degradation, climate change, poverty, inequality, resource depletion and loss of ecosystem resilience (Lawal et al., 2025; Magaji et al., 2025). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, was a significant change in international development governance, with the introduction of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets aimed at bringing together the three pillars of economic prosperity, social inclusion and environmental protection in a shared development framework (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs are different from previous development frameworks which typically operated in a dualistic approach to economic growth and environmental protection, because they focus on the interdependence of these spheres of policy, and on the need to design institutions and policies that can address trade-offs between them across sectors and levels of government. The Paris Agreement calls for countries to define and continuously increase their nationally determined contributions (NDC) and to take adaptation, resilience and pathways towards low-emission development (LED) (United Nations, 2015). However, sustainable development governance increasingly relies upon not only the willingness of governments to make international commitments, but also on their ability to implement them in the form of coherent domestic policies and policies, legislation, institutions, budgets, implementation plans and measurable results.

The shift from global commitment to national implementation is especially significant in developing countries, where environmental exposure is often coupled with poverty, population growth, reliance on natural resources, infrastructure and institutional shortfalls (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Jafaru et al., 2025; Magaji & Aluko, 2020). In these contexts, sustainable development policies should address both the short- and long-term socioeconomic and environmental risks. The challenge is thus not only related to the formulation of appropriate policies, but also to the coordination of the implementation in public institutions, private-sector actors, civil society, communities and development partners. Also, the need for alignment of national development plan, sectoral policies, public expenditure and environmental goals. The Sustainable Development policy literature highlights that policy coherence – not coherence between policies within a single level of government – is the key to sustainable outcomes, namely that policies at different levels of government must not be contradictory, but rather complementary (Nilsson et al., 2012; OECD, 2018; Adenekan et al., 2025). Policy coherence is not simply a matter of having suitable policy goals; it also requires that policy goals, policy instruments, institutional mandates, financial resources and policy implementation arrangements align to reinforce one another. This is especially relevant in the context of environmental governance, as environmental goals could be influenced by decisions outside of the traditional environmental-policy realm, such as decisions in the areas of energy, agriculture, transport, mining, infrastructure, trade and public finances.

Nigeria is an important case to explore the nexus between global sustainable-development commitments and the implementation of policy at the national level. Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation and is one of the continent's largest economies, placing it in a strategic position in regard to its role within Africa's and the world's development governance framework. However, there are significant environmental and climatic challenges in the country such as flooding, drought, desertification, land degradation, coastal vulnerability, loss of biodiversity, ecosystem degradation and climate-related disruptions of livelihoods. These pressures combine with the socio-economic vulnerabilities of the rural sector and populations that rely heavily on agriculture and natural resource utilization (Ologbonori et al., 2025). The Nigerian climate literature shows that while the effects of climate variability and climate change have been felt, their magnitude and distribution are geographically and socioeconomically variable (Adebayo et al., 2021). The environmental issues faced by Nigeria are not just ecological issues but issues of development and governance that can impact food security, employment, public health, migration, poverty alleviation and social stability among others.

To meet these challenges, Nigeria has increasingly brought international sustainable-development and environment pledges into its national policy and institutional processes. With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the country established a framework for domesticating and coordinating SDG 2030 Agenda implementation, such as the SDG Implementation Plan 2020–2030 and a series of Voluntary National Reviews. The architecture of sustainable development in Nigeria has also grown by expanding the work on integrating SDGs in the national development planning process and public institutions' financing and statistical processes. The national statistical systems are still being integrated with SDG indicators and the adoption of an Integrated National Financing

Framework is ongoing while selected SDGs are being evaluated at the country level in the country's 2025 Third Voluntary National Review (VNR) (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2025). The developments highlight the growing awareness in Nigeria that going beyond projects and programmes to achieve sustainable development requires institutional mechanisms.

Another significant example of Nigeria's efforts to implement international commitments into its policies is climate governance. Nigeria has made their first NDC to the Paris Agreement, followed by their updated 2021 NDC which has an unconditional commitment to reducing emissions to 20% below business as usual by 2030, and a conditional commitment of 47% with international support (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021a). The country's climate aspirations have also been strengthened, with a long-term low-emission development vision for a strategic pathway towards the country's shift towards a low-carbon and climate-resilient development trajectory (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021b). Nigeria has recently submitted its 3rd NDC, which is an update of mitigation and adaptation actions in the context of the ongoing international climate regime (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2025a). The commitments show a high level of formal convergence of Nigeria's national climate agenda with the global framework of environmental governance.

This international alignment has been complemented at the domestic level by an ever-increasing number of environmental laws, policies and institutional frameworks. The Revised National Policy on the Environment (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2016) establishes a general policy for environmental protection and sustainable management of the natural resources of the Nation, pollution control, biodiversity conservation and the integration of environmental considerations into Nation's socioeconomic development. The adoption of the Climate Change Act 2021 is another institutional milestone in the sense that it puts in place an institutional framework to coordinate climate action, to integrate climate considerations into national development plans, to mobilise climate finance and to provide institutional mechanisms for climate governance in Nigeria (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021c). The creation of the National Council on Climate Change and the introduction of national planning and carbon budgeting for climate action show a step towards shifting climate governance from a policy-oriented to a legally binding framework for implementation. Nigeria's development planning paradigm has also taken the view of sustainable and inclusive development for granted, with the country's national development plans now increasingly incorporating environmental sustainability and climate resilience elements as part of the long-term socio-economic transformation process.

However, although there is a great deal of expansion in Nigeria's sustainable-development policy architecture, this has not always led to commensurate implementation outcomes, as a result of the existence of international commitments, laws, strategies and institutional arrangements. This establishes the kernel issue that will be dealt with in this article. The fact that Nigeria seems to have a conundrum of development governance is becoming more and more noticeable, as the formal structure of sustainable-development governance is becoming more complex, while there are significant environmental and climate-related issues that still exist. The processes of turning policy commitments into concrete action in the field have come into question, given the ongoing environmental degradation, climate vulnerability, poor waste management, ecosystem loss, land degradation, exposure to flooding and weak enforcement of environmental standards. The focus is thus not just on the adoption of sustainable-development policies by Nigeria, but on the institutional, financial, administrative and accountability framework that underpins the implementation of the policies is coherent and effective.

It is important to differentiate between the policy formulation and implementation for understanding this problem. Policy implementation refers to the process of turning formally approved policy goals into administrative choices, programmes, laws, budgets and behaviours. The classic implementation literature shows that various aspects of implementation – policy clarity, institutional capacity, inter-organisational relations, resources, political support and the nature of the implementation environment (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980) – are important to the effectiveness of public policy. They are especially relevant in the scope of environmental policy, where the implementation of the policy is spread out across different bodies and environmental effects are seldom tangible in the short-term. A policy can thus be technically correct but with a low impact if the institutions charged with its implementation are under-resourced; if the requirements of the policy are interdependent; if there is a lack of coordination; or if the requirements of the policy are unable to be implemented due to competing policy priorities.

This can be seen in Nigeria as there are significant indications of such implementation difficulties. Institutional weaknesses, lack of coordination, lack of enforcement, and lack of participation of stakeholders are important constraints on the effectiveness of the environmental policy in Nigeria (Oniemola & Tasie, 2019; Ajibola et al., 2025). Likewise, research on how interventions to combat desertification work in Nigeria reveals that environmental policies do not automatically translate to effective implementation, and this is attributed to factors such as the lack of integration and implementation of sustainable interventions in the policy cycle, lack of participation by local institutions and communities, and lack of ownership and monitoring and evaluation (Musad, 2021; Hafizu et al., 2025; Bello et al., 2025). The results are significant for they reveal that the problem of environmental governance in Nigeria cannot solely be attributed to the lack of policies. Rather, much attention needs to be paid to the institutional and implementation processes that can make or break the effectiveness of current commitments.

One more aspect of the implementation issue is financing. Much greater and sustained investment is needed for infrastructure, technology, human capacity, ecosystem restoration, adaptation, renewable energy, disaster-risk reduction and environmental monitoring for sustainable development and climate action. But where policy promises go unaccompanied by predictable funding, they can easily remain largely aspirational. Adaptation estimates, conducted through the analysis of public expenditure data, show low levels of public expenditures that align well with the extent of adaptation needs in Nigeria, and a historical preference for public climate expenditure on mitigation rather than adaptation (Olufemi et al., 2021; Tanko et al., 2025; Suleman et al., 2025). This poses a critical implementation challenge, as Nigeria is vulnerable to flooding, drought, heat stress, agricultural disruption, and other climate change effects, underscoring the need for adaptation (Olusola et al., 2025; Abiola et al., 2025; Yakubu et al., 2025). Also, the conditional nature of Nigeria's climate commitments is partly dependent on access to international climate financing, technology transfer, and other external aid (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021a). As such, the financing aspect connects the capacity to implement at the national level with the international political economy of sustainable development.

The implementation challenge is also partly due to institutional fragmentation. However, while sustainable-development goals span traditional administrative lines, government institutions often have sector-specific mandates. Environmental goals are therefore in conflict with policies that encourage petroleum production, agricultural expansion, infrastructure development, mining, industrialisation or urban growth. It does not have to be that these objectives are incompatible; it could be that they are not implemented together. Nilsson et al. (2012) suggest that policy coherence needs to be evaluated in the process of interaction between policy goals, instruments and implementation practices. Likewise the OECD (2018) highlights the need for institutional arrangements that help governments recognise and deal with policy interlinkages across levels and sectors of government. Poor horizontal coordination within the federal level of government in Nigeria, and limited vertical coordination between the federal, state and local levels of government can lead to a disconnect between national pledges and local implementation.

The vertical implementation problem is of paramount importance in the context of the federal structure of Nigeria. Issues such as climate change, habitat loss, freshwater security, and the impact of bioengineering are some of the environmental issues that may be resolved at the state and local-government/community level, and fall under the purview of national policies. Flooding, erosion, land degradation, waste management, deforestation, stress of water and climate-related livelihood disruption are specific spatial and social processes. National policies can thus have only a limited impact if the subnational institutions are not empowered, resourced, technically capable or incentivized to make them local programmes. Limited engagement of the local government and communities, coupled with low local ownership, has been observed to negatively impact the sustainability of the interventions in Nigeria's environmental-policy implementation context (Musad 2021; Magaji et al., 2024). This means that the ability of national sustainable-development governance to deliver impactful results is highly reliant on the vertical policy system and the connection between international level commitments, federal level governance, state level governance and the local level and community-level action.

Further gaps in implementation include monitoring and accountability. Good governance for sustainable development depends on accurate data on implementation, where resources have gone, who is accountable, and the results of the implementation, as well as where corrective action is needed. SDG statistical and reporting architecture in Nigeria has strengthened, for instance, by ensuring that SDG indicators are included in national statistical systems and by carrying out country-led evaluations (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2025). Reporting progress on policy commitments is not the same as policy effectiveness, however. Indicators that link directly to institutional responsibilities, budgets, timelines and measurable outcomes are essential to a robust implementation system. This is especially relevant as governments can show high levels of activity, in the form of programmes, strategies or workshops etc, but without showing improvements in the environmental or socioeconomic outcomes. The challenge then becomes to shift the emphasis from activities to outcomes in reporting, monitoring and evaluation.

Another issue related to policy accumulation and policy coherence is also raised. The advantage of Nigeria's growing environmental and sustainable-development policy framework is that it offers several policy tools that can be used to achieve environmental goals. But, if policies are not developed with sufficient mechanisms for integration, policy proliferation can also create overlapping mandates and institutional duplication and inconsistent implementation requirements. The presence of several strategies and institutions must not be taken as a sign of the capacity to govern. The key question is whether these instruments create a coherent implementation system with clear linkages between objectives, responsibilities, finances, monitoring and accountability. In this context, policy coherence for sustainable development is of particular importance since it focuses on the interactions between policies, rather than on the assessment of individual policies (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2024).

Several studies have been conducted on environmental degradation, climate change, environmental governance and sustainable development in Nigeria, but there are certain lacunas. Most of the literature available is sectoral in nature and discusses climate change, desertification, flooding, environmental degradation, adaptation, natural-resource-management or specific environmental policies separately. Although the studies offer interesting findings on individual sectors, they offer less systematic knowledge of how the overall Nigerian global commitments, national policies and implementation institutions function as an interconnected governance system. Second, previous research often focuses on policy development and institutional creation, but not on how commitments are transformed into action. Operationalisation of the responsibilities of implementation, financing, monitoring and accountability mechanisms is often not sufficiently recognised as part of a policy, institution or legal instrument's implementation. Thirdly, there is a lack of synergy between the international governance and national implementation aspects of sustainability. The mechanisms by which the international norms and obligations are institutionalized within the national administrative process have been rarely studied, and often examined separately from the challenges of implementation in the national context. Finally, the literature offers a relatively limited systematic evaluation of the implementation gap in multiple dimensions at the same time, notably policy alignment, institutional coordination, financing, monitoring and sub-national localisation. Lastly, there is a need for a more explicit policy coherence approach to explore how Nigeria is fulfilling its SD commitments across the economic, social, and environmental policy space as opposed to having them as standalone environmental responsibilities.

This article fills this gap by focusing attention on the quality of Nigeria's domestic implementation architecture, rather than on the existence of the sustainable-development commitments. It defines the implementation gap as the gap between what has been committed to and what institutions, finances, administration, monitoring mechanisms and subnational mechanisms are in place to deliver results. The article thus explores the Nigeria's governance for sustainable development in the context of policy alignment, institutional coordination, financing, monitoring and accountability, and subnational localisation, with the aim of examining the linkages between these elements. The article therefore focuses on the five dimensions of governance for sustainable development in Nigeria policy alignment, institutional coordination, financing, monitoring and accountability, and subnational localisation and examines the linkages between these dimensions. It makes a contribution to the literature by integrating international environmental commitments and their implementation at the domestic level in a single analytical framework and by considering coherence in implementation as a necessary precondition for the effectiveness of sustainable development.

This article thus seeks to evaluate the differences between Nigeria's global sustainable-development and environmental commitments and what could be done at a national level to implement them effectively, particularly the institutional, financial, coordination, monitoring and subnational governance factors that constrain effective implementation. Specifically, the article aims at analysing the extent of coherence between Nigeria's global sustainable-development and environmental commitments, as well as their incorporation into Nigeria's national laws, policies, sustainable-development plans and institutional arrangements, identify and analyse the major gaps in policy implementation in Nigeria, and propose an implementation oriented governance framework and policy instruments to strengthen coherence, institutional accountability and translation of global environmental commitments to measurable sustainable-development outcomes in Nigeria.

The article highlights the implementation gap, not just the listing of Nigeria's environmental commitments, but rather the issue of institutional effectiveness and policy delivery, making sustainable-development governance a question of policy delivery. The fundamental policy is that the main obstacle to Nigeria is not the lack of policies and plans for environmental and sustainable development, but the lack of an effective, coordinated and well-funded implementation of these policies and plans in terms of measurable action and effective enforcement. To make a dent in this, Nigeria must join the global environmental governance fold not by mere undertaking, but by tangible steps to enhance environmental sustainability, climate resilience and inclusive development.

Absolutely. The next section should follow logically from the introduction and create the analytical basis of the article without getting too general in a descriptive literature review. I suggest it be organised along the following lines: Conceptual review, theoretical underpinning and the Nigerian governance environment with a telecognitive flow.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

The sustainable development governance is the institutional and policy processes in which the economic, social and environmental goals are coordinated and integrated towards securing long-term outcomes in sustainable development (Al-Amin et al., 2025; Mansur et al., 2025). It is fundamentally different to traditional environmental governance in that it must be multi-sector and multi-level due to the potential for inter-sector and intergovernmental interactions between energy, agriculture, infrastructure, transport, industry and finance to either strengthen or weaken environmental goals (Imam-Binuyo et al., 2026; Chinedu et al., 2021). As such, the 2030 Agenda calls on governments to deal with the interdependence and possible trade-offs of development goals. Horan (2020) has suggested that the SDGs must be mainstreamed in policy-making processes, not just an SDG policy agenda. Likewise, the OECD (2018, 2024) highlights the importance of policy coherence, institutional coordination, the inclusion of stakeholders and monitoring as key elements of sustainable-development governance.

The implementation of policy involves bringing policies into programmes, administration, allocation of resources, and measurable outcomes. If there is a lack of implementation capacity, financing, or coordination or political support, a policy may be well-intentioned but never actually achieve its goals or be legally adopted. The distinction becomes significant in Nigeria, where there is very extensive legislation and policies in place, but it has not led to effective environmental management. The review of environmental governance in Nigeria reveals that institutional coordination, policy enforcement and policy implementation are persistent constraints on environmental governance in the country, coupled with weak participation (Owolabi et al., 2022; Malabu et al., 2025). The implementation gap then is the gap between what is formally committed to be achieved by the government and what is actually delivered.

This conceptual linkage of the policy formulation and implementation process is useful and can be found in policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD). It is about consistency and coherence of policies, instruments and implementation practices. In fact, Nilsson et al. (2012) show that policies can be problematic even though their goals seem to be the same, as the instruments and practices for their implementation can cause conflicts. This distinction is very important for Nigeria because environmental goals are often intertwined with policies for economic growth, petroleum production, infrastructure development, agricultural expansion, and exploitation of natural resources. Therefore, sustainability governance needs to be analyzed through an evaluation of not only the existence of appropriate policies but also their implementation in ways that are synergic.

Multi-level governance also emphasizes the inter-connectedness of international, national and sub-national institutions through which sustainable-development commitments flow. Global treaties set out general commitments, which national governments translate into laws and policies, and that state and local institutions are responsible for a significant part of implementation. This means that low-level capacity or coordination can break the chain of implementation from the global to the local levels. Subnational capacity, financing and institutional coordination are key factors that influence the realization of locally meaningful outcomes from national commitments in Nigeria.

Theoretical Review

The study focuses mainly on Policy Implementation Theory supported by Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development and Multi-Level Governance Theory. According to the Policy Implementation Framework of Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980), the outcomes of implementation will vary as a function of the clarity and consistency of policy goals, institutional arrangements, resources, implementing agencies, political support, and the socioeconomic context. The framework is especially suited for this study because it focuses on the process of how policies are translated into policy outcomes rather than on whether a policy exists. The framework is useful to understanding why in the Nigerian context, the implementation of extensive environmental and sustainable-development policies may be weak despite their existence.

This explanation is reinforced by the Policy Coherence perspective that addresses interactions between the development and implementation of policy goals, instruments and practices. In situations where the policy goals seem to be mutually agreeable, conflicts can arise during implementation, as demonstrated by Nilsson et al. (2012). OECD (2018, 2019, 2024) also defines policy coherence as a governance challenge that involves the management of interactions between policies, coordination of institutions, long-term policy priorities, financing and monitoring. This is especially valuable for examining Nigeria's sustainable-development agenda as many sectors of the economy and society are involved in environmental commitments.

Multi-Level Governance Theory is helpful for tackling the vertical dimension of implementation. Sustainable development is a multiple stakeholder process – between international organisations, national governments, state governments, local governments, civil society and the private sector. Therefore, part of the success of the effectiveness of global commitments will depend on how effective the transfer of responsibilities, resources and information will be across governance levels. The three perspectives can be combined and the implementation gap in Nigeria takes the form of policy design and alignment, institutional coordination, resources and policy coherence and vertical implementation capacity.

Empirical Review

The empirical literature mostly supports the presence of significant implementation issues in Nigeria. Based on the qualitative document analysis, Musad (2021) identifies major gaps between policy and practice in the interventions on desertification in Nigeria and also demonstrates that uptake of formal policy commitments has not been consistently followed up on the ground. Similarly, the Nigerian case of environmental governance reveals that environmental policies are hindered by weak institutions, limited enforcement, poor participation and coordination issues (Owolabi et al., 2022). These results suggest that the implementation problem is found not solely within one sector of environmental policy but is structural.

In Nigeria, Emoekabu (2022) looks at the challenges of translating climate goals into action on the ground through policy making and implementation. Institutional capacity, political and administrative contexts and the linkage between policy formulation and implementation are stressed. Similarly, continued problems of implementation are in line with other research indicating that Nigeria has produced a lot of policies without the expected results in terms of governance performance. Olowu and Babalola (2025) contend that the problem of sustainable development in Nigeria has come to be more attributed to the lack of effective policy design, implementation and institutional governance than to the lack of policy instruments.

This Nigerian evidence is confirmed by international comparative evidence. Institutional fragmentation, administrative capacity, lack of funding, coordination and political-economy constraints are cited as common implementation challenges by Clube and Tomei (2026) in low and middle-income countries. Their results are applicable to Nigeria because they show that having environmental policies in place does not automatically lead to implementation if there is lack of institutional and financial support.

It has also been shown in the literature that policy coherence is important. Empirically, Nilsson et al. (2012) demonstrate that the policy conflicts may not be driven by the policy goals per se, but by the policy implementation instruments and practices. Similarly, Horan (2020), in his study of SDG integration in Ireland, shows how the SDGs can be integrated into practice if there are institutional mechanisms that link SDG goals to the regular policy process. OECD analyses also reveal that governments have ongoing challenges to bringing sustainable-development aspects into their policy domains and governance processes (OECD, 2018, 2019, 2024).

All these contributions notwithstanding, there is a gap in the Nigerian literature which is worthwhile to fill. The majority of the existing studies deal with individual environmental policies, with climate governance or desertification or institutional weaknesses in isolation. Little has so far been done to look into Nigeria's interpretation of its sustainable-development commitments at the international level, at the domestic policy level, at the institutional level, at the financial level, at the monitoring level and at the subnational level. This study aims to fill this void by bringing together these three strands in one analytical framework and measuring how far Nigeria's international environmental commitments have been translated into coherent policy action at the national level.

Methodology

In this study, the qualitative documentary research was used to fill the gap between Nigeria's commitment to sustainable development and environmental issues at the international level and policy implementation at the national or domestic level. The study is purely secondary data sourced from authoritative and relevant national and international documents such as the Nigeria National Policy on the Environment, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Implementation Plan 2020-2030, National Development Plans, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), Climate Change Act 2021, Nigeria's Long-Term Low-Emission Development Vision, Voluntary National Reviews, relevant federal government reports, documentations from the United Nations and (OECD) Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development based on peer-reviewed scholarly documentations. Documents were purposively selected due to their direct relevance to topics of sustainable-development governance, environmental policy, environmental commitment to climate change, institutional responsibilities, financing, monitoring and implementation in Nigeria. Structured qualitative content analysis was used to analyse data, which were themed around five previously identified dimensions of implementation gap: policy alignment, institutional coordination, financing and resource mobilisation, monitoring and accountability, and subnational localisation. The analysis drew on a comparison between Nigeria's international commitments and its domestic policies, legal instruments, institutional mandates and implementation mechanisms to identify the gaps, overlaps, and inconsistencies in implementation. To ensure findings are credible and reliable, triangulation across government documents, international reports and peer-reviewed studies was used, whilst an attempt was made to pay attention to the temporal development of Nigeria's policy architecture to distinguish persistent implementation constraints from more recent institutional reforms. The study is not in any way trying to make statistical inferences about cause and effect but rather gives a structured analytical analysis of the extent to which, and the ways in which, institutional, financial, coordination and accountability circumstances influence the transformation of global sustainable-development commitments to action in domestic policy in Nigeria.

Results

Data Presentation and Analysis

Evidence suggests that Nigeria has a relatively in-depth policy framework for the translation of global sustainable-development and environmental commitments into action at the national level. The architecture spans the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Implementation Plan 2020–2030, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the Climate Change Act 2021, the Revised National Policy on the Environment, national development plans, the Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) and the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2016, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs, 2020). But, the documentary evidence suggests there has been a long-standing gap between policy commitment and implementation performance. The results are presented in five sections: policy alignment, institutional coordination, financing, monitoring and accountability, and subnational localisation.

Table 1: Nigeria's Domestic Implementation Architecture for Global Commitments

The first two stages take place at the international level and the latter two at the domestic or institutional level. The first two steps happen at the international level, while the latter two steps happen at the domestic or institutional level.

Global commitment	Domestic policy/institutional response	Implementation assessment
2030 Agenda/SDGs	SDGs Implementation Plan 2020–2030; SDG coordination architecture	Strong formal alignment; uneven outcomes
Paris Agreement	NDCs and updated climate commitments	Strong policy alignment; financing and implementation constraints
Climate governance	Climate Change Act 2021; National Council on Climate Change	Strong legal foundation; coordination challenges remain
Environmental sustainability	Revised National Policy on Environment	Established policy framework; enforcement gaps
Sustainable-development financing	Integrated National Financing Framework	Institutional progress; fiscal constraints persist
SDG monitoring	VNRs, national indicators and statistical systems	Improving measurement; weak link to corrective action
Local implementation	Federal–state–local SDG implementation framework	Formal recognition; uneven subnational capacity

Source: *Author's synthesis from Federal Government of Nigeria (2016, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c), Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs (2020), and Federal Government of Nigeria (2025).*

The evidence suggests that policy alignment is the most robust element of Nigeria's implementation architecture. The commitments of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement have been taken up into planning, legislation and institutional arrangements in Nigeria over the years. The Climate Change Act 2021, for instance, gives legal framework to the concept of climate governance, whereas the NDCs are a way of translating international climate commitments into nationally determined mitigation and adaptation targets (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021a, 2021c). Likewise, the SDGs Implementation Plan 2020 - 2030 offers guidance on how to incorporate the SDGs into national development agendas (Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs, 2020).

The second finding is related to institutional coordination. Nigeria has robust mechanisms for SDG and climate governance, yet there are a number of ministries departments agencies (MDAs) and levels of government responsible for implementation. This can create potential overlaps, coordination issues and sectoral silos. There are existing studies that attribute the persistent challenges in Nigeria as the weak institutional coordination and inadequate enforcement of laws and fragmented environmental governance (Oniemola & Tasie, 2019). So the issue of no institutions becomes a matter of institutional coherence instead.

The third discovery is related to financing. It represents an acknowledgment that the SDGs will only be realized through the systematic mobilization and alignment of public and private financing as the establishment of INFF shows. However, Nigeria's fiscal capacity is limited, which limits implementation. The limited fiscal space for sustainable-development investment is highlighted by the 2025 VNR reporting the government revenue in 2023 was only 9.6% of GDP. (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2025). Evidence also indicates that Nigeria's adaptation needs remain unmet due to climate expenditure which has been more skewed towards mitigation rather than adaptation (Olufemi et al., 2021). The financing gap thus continues to be a key connection between lofty policy intentions and weak implementation.

The fourth finding relates to monitoring and accountability. Nigeria has enhanced the monitoring architecture for the SDGs, including national indicators, statistical alignment and VNRs and country-led evaluations. The 2025 VNR reports that 52 key indicators were assessed, with 34.6% showing improvement, 30.8% stagnating and 34.6% regressing (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2025). The outcomes of these findings clearly show that the positive impact of institutional monitoring on development has not been uniform. Monitoring thus seems to be more of a reporting tool than a tool for systematic corrective policy action.

The fifth finding is about subnational localisation. State and local government roles in SDG implementation are recognised in Nigeria, with some having the capacity to translate national commitments into local programmes, while others do not. Vertical policy implementation may be undermined by fiscal resource inequalities, technical capacity, and institutional effectiveness and local priorities. This is especially significant in the context of climate and environmental policies as vulnerability and environmental issues are local and need local solutions (Musad, 2021).

Overall Implementation Gap

The documentation can thus be summarised as follows:

Table 2: Dimensions of Nigeria's Sustainable-Development Implementation Gap

Dimension	Evidence	Overall assessment
Policy alignment	Extensive domestication of SDGs, NDCs and environmental commitments	Relatively strong
Institutional coordination	Multiple institutions with overlapping responsibilities	Moderate/fragmented
Financing	INFF established but fiscal space remains constrained	Weak–moderate
Monitoring/accountability	Improved data and reporting but mixed outcomes	Moderate/improving
Subnational localisation	Formal framework but uneven state/local capacity	Uneven
Overall implementation	34.6% improved; 30.8% stagnant; 34.6% regressed	Mixed

Source: *Author's synthesis based on Federal Government of Nigeria (2025) and related policy literature.*

The overall picture is then a commitment–implementation gap on the international level. Nigeria has put in place formal policy and institutional structures essential for global sustainable-development governance, but the lack of coordination, finance, accountability and localisation hinders the delivery of sustainable-development outcomes.

Discussion of Findings

The results illustrate that Nigeria is facing a greater policy implementation challenge, rather than policymaking as its main challenge in sustainable development. The nation has responded to the global environmental and sustainable development commitments through various extents of legislation, national plans and institutional mechanism (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2016, 2021a, 2021c). But what has not matched is the implementation performance from formal policy alignment. This confirms the policy-implementation thesis that policy success requires institutional capacity, resources, and coordination and implementation conditions, as well as the policy design itself (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980).

Nigeria has made an increasingly good track to internalization of global sustainability norms, evidenced by the high level of policy alignment. However, policy-coherence challenges have also surfaced due to multiple policies and institutions. Sectoral policies can either support or hinder the achievement of environmental goals, as sustainable development transcends energy, agriculture, infrastructure, transport, industry, mining, finance and environmental management. Policy coherence is not a matter of individual policy consistency, but of the interconnections between policy goals, policy instruments and policy implementation, according to Nilsson et al. (2012). This is corroborated by Nigeria, where the increasing institutional coverage has not led to the eradication of fragmentation.

Financing turns out to be a significant constraint on implementation. The establishment of the INFF is a step towards systematic SDG financing, but a limited domestic revenue makes it difficult for the government to finance ambitious sustainability programmes (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2025). Nigeria's climate exposure is significant in the context of climate adaptation, representing a major challenge for the country. The historical lack of adequate alignment of climate spending towards adaptation reinforces the importance of budgetary alignment as a policy commitment test (Olufemi et al., 2021).

Another important difference in the findings is that monitoring does not necessarily lead to accountability. The Federal Government of Nigeria is strengthening SDG indicators, statistical systems and VNR reporting an institutional development. The reality that in about two-thirds of the indicators assessed, results remained unchanged or took a step back, however, indicates that there is a need for reporting processes to be more tightly tied to policy correction. Poor performance shall generate institutional review and reallocation of resources and adjustment of policy rather than just be documented to a report of poor performance.

The subnational results also highlight the significance of multi-level governance. International commitments are developed on a global level and domesticated on a national level and implemented to a large extent through state and local institutions. When the implementation is conducted at a lower level of governance, it can be weakened by a lack of resources, technical capacity or administrative authority at the subnational level. This strengthens the case for more than just assigning responsibilities to subnational authorities, it must also enable the capacity of financial, technical and institutional to fulfil the responsibilities (Musad, 2021).

The Federal Government of Nigeria's VNR 2025 shows empirical evidence of the unevenness of Nigeria's implementation trajectory in a finding that only 34.6% of assessed indicators improved, 30.8% remained unchanged, and 34.6% worsened. This shouldn't be seen as evidence of "total failure" of policies. Instead, it is a sign of a partial institutional success and a lack of effectiveness of implementation. Nigeria has developed many of the formal structures necessary for sustainable-development governance, but policy–institution–financing–monitoring–local implementation linkages are not sufficiently tight.

In summary, the results suggest the following: Nigeria's nation policy accumulation and implementation consolidation. The policy coherence should be enhanced, sustainability goals should be incorporated into sectoral budgets, intergovernmental coordination should be strengthened, intergovernmental monitoring to accountability should be strengthened, and sufficient resources and technical capacities should be provided to subnational institutions. Sustainable-development governance should be seen as a continuous policy cycle, from the adoption of international commitments to the implementation, financing, monitoring, corrective action, and sustainable outcomes, not just as a single process of committing to international commitments.

Summary of Findings

This study looked at the disconnect between Nigeria's international sustainable development and environmental policies and their translation into the country's policy implementation, with secondary data and policy documents analysed using thematic documentary analysis. The results reveal that Nigeria has made significant strides toward embedding global pledges, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement, in its domestic policies and institutional frameworks. This is captured in the SDGs Implementation Plan (2020–2030), Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the Climate Change Act (2021), the Revised National Policy on the Environment (2016) and National development plans and emerging sustainable-development financing as well as monitoring mechanisms (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs, 2020). The evidence suggests, however, that formal policy alignment has not always been translated into outcomes of implementation.

There were five main implementation gaps identified. The first aspect of policy alignment is relatively high, since Nigeria has a high degree of domestication of most key international sustainable-development and environmental commitments. Secondly, coordination between institutions is still weak, and the responsibilities for sustainable development in various ministries, departments and agencies, and at various levels of government are being devolved to many agencies, leading to coordination and policy-coherence challenges (Nilsson et al., 2012; OECD, 2018). Third, funds are still a huge challenge because of limited fiscal space, competing development priorities, and financial resources that are still limited for environmental and climate programmes, especially adaptation (Olufemi et al., 2021; Federal Government of Nigeria, 2025).

Fourth, Nigeria has enhanced its monitoring and reporting system, but the connection between monitoring evidence and the appropriate policy response and institutional accountability is limited. Fifth, there is also subnational localization which is unequal, with varying levels of financial, technical and institutional capacity to put in place national sustainability priorities existing at the subnational level (Musad, 2021).

The 2025 3rd Voluntary National Review is especially significant evidence of the challenge of implementation. According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (2025), out of the 52 key SDG indicators, 34.6% improved, 30.8% remained unchanged and 34.6% worsened. The results thus suggest a high degree of institutionalisation with varying levels of implementation performance. The problem with Nigeria is not the lack of policies but the poor institutional, financial, coordination and accountability processes needed to deliver tangible impacts in a manner that is sustainable.

Conclusion

The study findings indicate high level commitment of Nigeria to international sustainable-development governance, however, there is still a huge gap between domestic policy making and implementation. The country has put in place a wide-ranging legal, policy, institutional and reporting framework that broadly aligns with its commitments under the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. But the presence of this framework has not necessarily led to the corresponding improvement in SDO.

The main finding is that Nigeria's sustainable-development challenge has gradually moved from policy adoption to effectiveness of implementation. The lack of inter-institutional coordination, inadequate funding, low implementation capacity, the lack of coupling of monitoring and accountability and weak subnational capacity combine to drive global commitments to action. This finding echoes the implementation perspective of Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) who highlight the importance of institutional capacity, resources, coordination and implementation conditions for successful policy outcomes, not just policy formulation.

The study also finds that the policy coherence and multi-level governance approach should be adopted to measure the sustainable-development governance in Nigeria. A true contribution to environmental and sustainable-development goals is impossible to make if they are limited to specific environmental institutions. They need to be embedded in the planning, budgeting and implementation of the economic and social sectors and effectively linked to the state, local government and community-level institutions. As in Nilsson et al. (2012) and OECD (2018), governments need to consider how to overcome policy synergies, deal with trade-offs and make sure that policies are coherent, at both sectoral and administrative levels.

Nigeria will achieve sustainable development in the future if it can transition from policy accumulation to implementation consolidation. The challenge is, therefore, to enhance the coherence, financing, coordination, monitoring and accountability of the current policy mechanisms, and not just to create new policy instruments. The mixed outcomes in 2025 VNR reflect a strong start by Nigeria but also a clear need to strengthen the processes of turning commitments into outcomes.

Recommendations

The study suggests that the following be done:

Improve coordination of policy efforts across government. The Federal Government should build up better processes to incorporate SDG and climate considerations into the planning and decision making of all relevant ministries, departments and agencies. Sustainability should not be regarded as a responsibility of the environment sector, but rather as a cross-government one.

Institutionalise policy-coherence assessments. The potential economic, social and environmental interactions of major national policies, development plans and public investment programmes should be systematically assessed prior to their implementation. This would facilitate the identification of policy conflicts and trade-offs and enhance policy coherence across sectoral policies in line with the policy-coherence framework suggested by Nilsson et al. (2012) and OECD (2018).

Develop public budget policies to support sustainability. All SDG and climate commitments must be explicitly linked in medium-term expenditure frameworks, annual budgets and public investment programmes. Assignments of budgets should be tied to measurable sustainability metrics to mitigate the disconnect between policy goals and resources available for implementation.

Boost and diversify climate and environmental finance. More focus needs to be on climate adaptation, ecosystem restoration and building resilience, especially within highly vulnerable communities. International climate finance and development finance and responsible private-sector investment should complement domestic financing, and capacity in countries should be strengthened in the management and monitoring of these resources (Olufemi et al., 2021).

Strengthen implementation accountability. Monitoring systems need to advance beyond reporting activities to measuring outputs, outcomes and impacts. Institutions with the responsibility for SDG or environmental indicators that fail to rise or fall should be expected to act with responsibility and to identify the underlying causes, to then develop corrective measures and to report on the ensuing improvements.

Improve the capacity of subnational implementation. The state and local governments should be provided with sufficient financial means, technical assistance, data and institutional support for their SDG and climate commitments to be localised. Moreover, local governments should be engaged more systematically in the process of designing, implementing and monitoring policies, where many environmental and climate issues are specific to the location.

Enhance the continuity and stability of institutions and policies. There is a need to ensure sustainable-development policies are not unnecessarily disrupted due to political administrative change. Long-term sustainability targets need to be included in the national development plan and backed up by measurable short-term steps that should be taken over the longer term than one political cycle.

Increase the involvement of stakeholders and the community. The participation of civil society organisations, research institutions, private-sector actors and affected communities should be integrated into the policy implementation and monitoring. Participatory mechanisms can contribute to enhanced local ownership, increased accountability, and increased information, and may be tailored to the local context and may not be part of national monitoring mechanisms.

Create an implementation-performance framework. Nigeria needs an integrated approach that connects each of the major Sustainable Development Commitments to a specific and accountable institution, target, budget, timeframe, measurement and accountability system. This would allow the exact determination of the points of implementation gaps in the global to local policy chain.

Effort to consolidate implementation rather than increase policies. There are a lot of policies already in existence on sustainable development and the environment, so further action should be taken in strengthening the existing policies rather than coming up with new ones. Policy consolidation would help eliminate institutional duplication, enhance administrative clarity and focus and allow limited financial and technical resources to be focused on measurable outcomes.

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