



Socio-economic Impact of State Capture and Development Crises on Women, Youth and Children in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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ABSTRACT

Background: Since the First Republic, Nigeria's political landscape has been dominated by an elitist political framework. Elitism has continued to shape the country's political culture, particularly in the Fourth Republic, when practices such as godfatherism, electoral fraud, political violence, and the privatisation of public resources became avenues for capturing and controlling state resources. Although these practices were not new to Nigeria's political history, they became more pronounced during Olusegun Obasanjo's administration and worsened under subsequent administrations.

Objective: The study examines the socioeconomic impact of state capture and development crises on women, youth, and children in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. It argues that the influence wielded by the political elite is not always exercised for the common good but is often directed towards personal interests. This has contributed to socioeconomic problems that adversely affect vulnerable groups in society, particularly women, youth, and children.

Method: The study adopted a qualitative research method, while a structural analytical approach guided the analysis. Data were obtained from secondary sources, including textbooks and journal articles. Elite theory was also adopted as the theoretical framework for the study.

Result: Findings indicate that Nigeria is deeply immersed in state capture, a structural arrangement through which the political class influences policies and controls the allocation of state resources for personal benefit. In Nigeria, state capture is perpetuated by the elite through several mechanisms, including the systematic weakening of state institutions, electoral manipulation, and violations of the rule of law.

Conclusion: Through godfatherism, electoral manipulation, weak institutions, and the embezzlement of public resources, the elite class has effectively redirected Nigeria's commonwealth towards personal aggrandisement.

Unique Contribution: The study contributes to the existing literature on state capture by examining its socioeconomic impact on women, youth, and children.

Key Recommendation: Key Nigerian institutions, including the judiciary, anti-corruption agencies, the electoral body, and the legislature, should be structurally reformed and sufficiently insulated from elite interference to enable them to function as effective checks on power.

Keywords: Socioeconomic impact, state capture, development crises, women, youth, children.



INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's political landscape has been dominated by a small group of powerful elites since the country gained independence in 1960. According to Undiyaundeye (2021), "on October 1, 1960, the Nigerian political and bureaucratic elite took over the reins of governance on the lowering of the Union Jack and raising of the Nigerian flag". These early elites included founding figures such as Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo, and Nnamdi Azikiwe, among others. Elitism in Nigeria's political system did not end with these founding figures; rather, it has continued to evolve (Undiyaundeye, 2021). The transition from military rule to democratic governance in 1999 saw the emergence of former military heads of state, senior military officers, and major political actors from the military era as members of the new political elite. Consequently, presidents, former presidents, governors, former governors, and other individuals who occupy or have occupied high-profile political positions have become part of this elite class in the Fourth Republic.

These elites constitute less than 1% of the population but wield considerable power and influence. Eghweree and Igbinoia (2024) maintain that "the control of political power by the elites in Nigeria guarantees access to state resources, which the elites use to manipulate and command loyalty and obedience from the masses". The excessive power and influence wielded by these elites have contributed to the capture and control of the Nigerian state. State capture has made it easier for political elites to manipulate policy formulation and shape policy outcomes in ways that favour them and their associates (Nwozor et al., 2021). In their bid to maintain control over the Nigerian state, they have resorted to various mechanisms, including godfatherism, domination of political party structures, institutional weakening, budget padding, inflation of public contract costs, electoral rigging and manipulation, media censorship and control, exploitation of ethno-religious differences, and suppression of the opposition (Nwozor et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Nigerian political elites do not always exercise their power and influence for the benefit of the masses; rather, they often use them to advance their personal interests. Indeed, these interests frequently conflict with the country's development aspirations. Bolarinwa and Osuji (2022) assert that the interests of political elites are antithetical to the policies needed to unite and sustain Nigerians, the Nigerian economy, and the country's developmental structures. The development crises resulting from the activities of political elites have significant adverse effects on women, youth, and children. These effects are evident in the high rates of out-of-school children, maternal mortality, poverty, malnutrition, unemployment, child labour, early marriage, and involvement in crime, among other problems (Bolarinwa & Osuji, 2022).

DEVELOPMENT CRISIS

To understand the concept of *development crisis*, it is necessary first to define *development*. Development is a complex concept that has defied a universally accepted definition. Adah and Abasilim (2015) argue that the ambiguous nature of development has made it difficult to establish a clear meaning. Indeed, scholars have made numerous attempts to define the concept. According to Adah and Abasilim (2015), some perspectives view development primarily from an



economic standpoint, while others consider it a broader concept that extends beyond the economic domain.

Despite the difficulty of arriving at a universally accepted definition, it is possible to identify indicators of development. Olanrewaju (2015) asserts that these indicators include access to functional healthcare facilities, access to safe drinking water, universal access to quality education, and equal opportunities for all members of society to participate in public affairs, with merit-based competition taking precedence over other considerations. According to Majekodunmi, Olajide-Arise, and Bisnis (2025), development indicators include poverty reduction, improved living standards, the promotion of social equity, enhanced infrastructure, and the achievement of sustainable economic growth. Ebohon and Emuedo (2010) identify economic indicators such as increases in national income, gross domestic product, and per capita income, as well as industrial growth, changing tastes, and new economic habits. On this basis, a development crisis can be understood as a situation characterised by the absence or inadequate provision of these development indicators.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in elite theory. The theory gained prominence in the early twentieth century through the writings of sociologists and political theorists such as Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, Ortega y Gasset, and C. Wright Mills (Alozie, 2023). The central proposition of the theory is that political power rests in the hands of a minority group. Accordingly, every society is composed of two major classes: the ruling class and the ruled class (Alozie, 2023). Nyewusira and Ndagee (2021) argue that “the theory posits that a small minority consisting members of the economic elite, policy planning networks and military institutions holds the most power in any society”. The various formulations of elite theory agree that major decisions with direct implications for society are made by the elite and that these decisions tend to reflect elite interests rather than the wishes of the majority (Okeke et al., 2017).

Elite theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding how a small group of Nigerian political elites has captured critical state institutions, including the executive, legislature, judiciary, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), anti-corruption agencies, and security agencies, to advance personal interests. This perspective aligns with Gaetano Mosca’s argument that the ruling class uses organisational power to maintain its dominance (Okeke et al., 2017). The theory also helps explain how the underlying objectives of political elites, including primitive accumulation, the retention of power, and the maintenance of factional loyalty, undermine development efforts.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research method for data analysis. This method enabled in-depth analysis of the impact of development crises arising from state capture by the political elites on women, youth and children. The study drew on secondary sources, including previous research



by scholars, government documents, newspapers, and journal articles relevant to the subject. They were reviewed under the following headings:

Nigerian Political Elite and their Mechanisms for State Capture

Nwozor et al. (2021) argue that although Nigeria sustained democratic governance for more than 21 years, its democratic processes were undermined by the practice of elective dictatorship. They add that electoral principles and institutional independence have been compromised.

Similarly, Lewis (2007), Onuoha (2014), Ibaba (2025), and other scholars assert that the Nigerian political elites have employed several mechanisms to maintain control of the state. These mechanisms include godfatherism, control of political structures, electoral manipulation and rigging, institutional weakening, inflation of public procurement and contract costs, media censorship and control, exploitation of ethno-religious differences, and budget padding. The following paragraphs critically examine some of these instruments of state capture.

Godfatherism

Godfatherism is a major instrument employed by the political elites to remain in control of government through proxies. Thus, they influence elections and appointment of stooges commonly referred to as “godsons” into key governmental positions. In fact, it is extremely difficult to occupy any governmental position without the support of these political elites who double as godfathers. Luka, Saleh, and Ayuba (2019) assert that there is an emerging trend in Nigeria which indicates that an intending contestant must have and depend on a godfather with the requisite wealth and power to get him into elective office. The implication is that contestants no longer rely on their popularity among the electorate but on their chosen godfathers to help them secure electoral victories.

The political elites often consider the sponsorship of their stooges for elective and appointive positions as an investment that will bring rewards. Due to this, governance structures, especially at the state and local government levels, are controlled and dominated by the political elites. Okoroafor (2023) asserts that political godfathers exert significant pressure on their protégés to appoint individuals loyal to the godfather's interests. As such, governance structures are not formed solely on the basis of merit but are instead influenced by patronage networks.

Electoral Manipulation, Rigging and Violence

Electoral manipulation, rigging and violence have been among the core strategies employed by the political elites to maintain perpetual control of the Nigerian state. They manipulate the electoral process through the monetisation of primary elections, vote buying, stuffing of ballot boxes, promotion of under-age voting, unlawful printing of voters' cards; snatching of ballot boxes, unlawful refusal to provide election materials, inflation and falsification of election results, illegal compilation of non-existing voter's name, intimidation of party agents, voters and



electoral officers; and appointment of their cronies as electoral officers (Kwen, 2019). For instance, during the 2022 Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) presidential primary election, the two leading aspirants, Atiku Abubakar and Nyesom Wike, ‘dollarised’ the process. While the Atiku camp was alleged to have given about \$20,000, Wike’s camp was said to have offered \$10,000 for each delegate in a desperate bid to clinch the coveted party ticket (Adepegba, 2022).

Again, these political elites use their cronies to buy votes during elections. This led to reports of widespread vote buying during elections in the country as clearly evident in 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections. According to Uthman (2024), a National Bureau of Statistics report indicated that vote buying affected 22% of the 2023 elections, five percentage points higher than the 17% recorded in the 2019 general elections. In Rivers State alone, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission said its operatives arrested six people suspected of vote trading and other electoral offences during the 2023 presidential elections (Naku, 2023).

Besides deploying several strategies to manipulate and rig elections, the political elites incite violence during election through several means. Prominent among these means is hate speech. As Moliki (2021) would put it, party elite in Nigeria use different strategies, including hate speech, to achieve electoral success, which often culminates in pre-electoral violence. They added that, during electioneering campaigns, political rallies and parades in the build up to 2015 and 2019 general elections, political elites from the major political parties employed provocative speeches as tools to project the programmes of the parties.

In the build-up to the 2015 general elections, Muhammadu Buhari made an inciting statement that he will “make Nigeria ungovernable” for his political arch-rival, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), if he emerges victorious in the poll (Moses, 2015). Also, within the same period, Godswill Akpabio threatened the opposition through his speech “those who want to take power through the back door will die. They will die” (Momoh, 2024). On the other hand, Ahmed Bola Tinubu threatened the then ruling party, PDP, in his speech, “it is going to be ‘rig and roast’. We are prepared not to go to court but drive them out” (Momoh, 2024).

Weakening of Institutions

Institutions are the pillars of governance in every country. The strength or weakness of institutions determines the level of good governance in a country. Strong institutions exist to serve as a cornerstone for achieving lasting prosperity, social cohesion, and democratic governance (Enang, 2024). However, in Nigeria, institutions do not live up to these expectations as they have continuously been weakened by the political elites through their overbearing influence. They have weakened these institutions to control them and dictate their terms. The most pronounced institutions weakened by these political elites include: judiciary, security and anti-graft agencies (Enang, 2024).



The judiciary, whose primary responsibilities are to uphold the rule of law, ensure justice, and protect citizens' rights regardless of status or background, has been captured by the political elites through the appointment of judicial officers. The Constitution grants the power to the executive to appoint judicial officers ranging from the Chief Justice to magistrates based on the recommendations of National Judicial Council (NJC) and state judicial service commission. This constitutional provision has granted the political elites the opportunity to appoint not just their cronies, but also their blood relations, who will subvert justice for their interest. Political elites have also built systems of influence around judicial officers through strategic gifts, including cars and houses, which create subtle obligations for the judicial officers to align their interests (Udofia et al., 2025).

Exploitation of Identity Politics

Identity politics is prominent in the Nigerian political landscape. The predominance stemmed from the diverse ethno-religious differences. Nigeria is home to more than 450 ethnic groups and two dominant religions, Islam and Christianity, structured along broad regional lines (Enoch, Hashim, & Abdulkadir, 2026). Due to the differences along religious and ethnic nationality, the people often disagree. Sometimes, this disagreement results in violent conflicts between and among these ethno-religious groups. Salawu (2010) argues that these conflicts often result of accusations and allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation, victimisation, discrimination, marginalisation, nepotism and bigotry (Salawu, 2010). However, instead of the political elites to bridge these ethno-religious differences, they weaponise it to mobilise support by presenting elections as contests between ethnic blocs rather than as democratic competitions of ideas (Madueke, 2025).

Nexus between State Capture and Development Crises in Nigeria

The state capture by the political elites has impacted negatively on Nigeria's development in diverse ways. One of such ways is embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds. Since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999, there have been cases of embezzlement and misappropriation of funds by the political elites. Evidence of this can be seen in the arraignment of these political elites over misappropriation of funds while in office by Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). For instance, after Abdulfatah Ahmed left office as governor of Kwara State in 2019, the EFCC interrogated and arraigned him over the alleged misappropriation of ₦3 billion during his administration (Daramola, 2024). Also, in 2015, EFCC reopened a 42-count charge against Timipre Sylva, former governor of Bayelsa State, over allegations that he stole ₦19.2 billion in state funds between 2007 and 2011 when he was governor (Daramola, 2024). In May 2018, Jolly Nyame was convicted over abuse of office and diversion of N1.64 billion during his tenure as governor of Taraba between 1999 and 2007 (Daramola, 2024). Moreover, former Kogi State Governor Yahaya Bello is facing fraud charges involving ₦110 billion and proceedings concerning the forfeiture of property valued at ₦80.2 billion (Agbo, 2025). Former Minister of Justice and Attorney-General of the Federation, Abubakar Malami, alongside his son and wife, is facing money-laundering charges involving ₦8.7 billion, among other cases (Ede, 2025).



Crony capitalism and Inflation of contract is another means Nigerian political elites employ to serve their personal interest at the expense of the country's development. Okorie, Abada, and Adibe (2021) assert that, "in Nigeria, crony capitalism manifests itself in many sectors of the economy, most notably the oil sector, where oil processing contracts, fuel importation licences and numerous oil-related contracts are often awarded to cronies of the political class". The cronies include either establishments of these political elites managed by their children, blood relations or trusted allies or businessmen who return an agreed percentage to them once the contract is awarded. For instance, in 2022, Bauchi State governor, Bala Mohammed awarded a company in which he is a director a shady contract worth N3.6 billion, in clear contravention of the Code of Conduct and Public Procurement laws (Abdulaziz, 2020). In 2017, the Ministry of Power, Works and Housing, and the Bureau of Public Procurement, under the leadership of Babatunde Fashola, were alleged to have inflated the sums of two contracts in excess of N2.4 billion (Umoru, 2017). In 2019, it was revealed that the former Governor of Zamfara State, Abdulaziz Yari, awarded a contract for the same project twice to the same contractor at an inflated cost. The contract for the construction and drilling of 84 solar-powered boreholes across the 14 Local governments of Zamfara State was first awarded in 2014 to a Chinese firm, China Zhonghao Nigeria Limited, for N27.5 billion (Ayitogo, 2019). The same contract was again awarded in 2018 with the same scope and at the same cost (Ayitogo, 2019).

Budget padding is another instrument for the political elites at the legislative arm to exploit the country's resources for their personal gains at the expense of the masses. According to Itua and Iyoha (2025), "budget padding is the dishonest practice of adding false or unnecessary figures to a government budget. In Nigeria, this problem has become more common in recent years". Oloto, Okechukwu, and Nnamani (2019) emphasise that legislators increase budget estimates from ministries, agencies and departments in collaboration with ministries that present the estimate. Such padding may be undertaken with the expectation that, if the budget is approved, part of the allocated funds will find its way into legislators' private pockets.

In 2016, the then Speaker of the House of Representatives and other principal officers were accused of inflating the budget by allocating billions of naira to approximately 2,000 allegedly fictitious constituency projects (Obiorah, Onyishi, & Okafor, 2023). During the passage of the 2025 budget, legislators influenced its expansion. For example, 238 projects exceeding N5 billion each, totaling N2.29 trillion, were added with little or no justification (Ogundapo, 2025). Also, 984 projects worth N1.71 trillion and 1,119 projects valued between N500 million and N1 billion (totaling N641.38 billion) were arbitrarily inserted (Ogundapo, 2025). Another 3,573 projects worth N653.19 billion were assigned to federal constituencies, and 1,972 projects valued at N444.04 billion were earmarked for senatorial districts (Ogundapo, 2025).

Another strategy used by the political elites to deploy the public resources for their personal gain is embarking on 'white elephant' projects. Although some of these projects are completed, they may remain grossly underutilised. Others, initiated several years ago, are still reportedly under construction or have been abandoned halfway, leaving their fate to subsequent officeholders (Isa, 2024). For instance, no fewer than 15 states spent N301 billion on airports that failed to meet the



yearly passenger traffic requirement per airport. They include Asaba, Ebonyi, Uyo, Bayelsa, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti, Anambra, Abia, Wachakal, Damaturu, and Dutse Airports. Others are Lafia, Kebbi, Auchi, Edo, Zamfara, Nasarawa and Gombe Airports (Kumolu & Okafor, 2023).

The Socio-Economic Impact on Women, Youth and Children

The development crises arising from mismanagement and misuse of Nigerian resources by the political elites adversely affect the masses specifically the vulnerable segments of the society which include: the women, youth and children. The effects on women, youth, and children include poverty, maternal mortality, unemployment, youth restiveness, out-of-school crisis, malnutrition, child labour, among others (Salabson, 2021).

Poverty

Poverty has long been one of the major challenges facing Nigerians. Poverty affects households across different parts of Nigeria. Thus, in 2018, Nigeria was designated as the poverty capital of the world overtaking India as the country with highest number of people living in extreme poverty with 89.9 million people living on less than US\$1.90 a day (Salabson, 2021). In 2019, the figure increased to 91.8 million which indicates an additional 4.9 million Nigerians had fallen into poverty (Salabson, 2021). Ucha (2010) observes that a large proportion of Nigeria's population lacks access to food, clothing, education, and other basic amenities, with women and children being among the most affected. A National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022) report revealed that two-thirds (67.5%) of children aged 0–17 were multidimensionally poor and that children accounted for half (51%) of all poor people (NBS, 2022). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) averred that, as of 2025, two out of every three children in Nigeria live in multidimensional poverty, meaning they lack access to essentials such as healthcare, quality education, nutrition, protection, and clean water (UNICEF, 2025).

Maternal Mortality

Maternal mortality is one of the most pervasive challenges facing women in Nigeria. The country has remained one of the countries with the highest cases of maternal mortality globally. Okafor (2025) asserts that, in Nigeria, one in 100 pregnant women die in labour or in the following days. This places the country at the top of a ranking that no country would want to lead. In 2023, Nigeria accounted for approximately 29% of all maternal deaths worldwide. That is an estimated total of 75,000 women dying in childbirth in a year, which works out at one death every seven minutes (Okafor, 2025). Poor healthcare facilities are one of the major contributors to the incidence of maternal mortality in the country. In most parts of the country, especially rural areas, the people lack good healthcare facilities. This is a major barrier to pregnant women receiving adequate maternal care (Adenigbagbe et al. (2024)). Pregnant women often face long travel distances to reach the nearest health centre, which can delay access to essential services (Adenigbagbe et al. (2024)

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Unemployment

Unemployment, especially among young people, has been increasing in Nigeria. According to Bello and Yahaya (2024), “in Nigeria, the rate of unemployment, particularly among the youth, has been rising to the point where it is not only piercing but also uncontrollable in light of the country's socioeconomic and security challenges”. Uwa, Chuke, and Elton (2016) assert that 60% of Nigerian youths are unemployed with secondary school-leavers mostly found among unemployed rural population accounting for about half of this figure, while university and polytechnic graduates make up the rest. Yet the nation’s universities and polytechnics continue to churn out more than 150,000 graduates annually and available jobs remain inadequate to keep pace with the ever-expanding army of job seekers.

Because of unemployment, some young people resort to crime as a means of survival. Aliyu, Lawal, and Haruna (2025) argue that, in a desperate quest to secure a livelihood, Nigerian youths have drifted from legitimate side jobs to illegal activities such as internet fraud, drug trafficking, etc. Onyekwere (2021) adds that the increasing wave of armed robbery, kidnapping, terror threats, and ongoing abductions of Nigerians with reckless abandon are as a result of youth unemployment.

Out-of-School Crisis

The out-of-school crisis is a pervasive problem affecting Nigerian children. A great number of Nigerian children are out of school. It is prevalent both in rural and urban areas. Ikiyei et al. (2022) averred that, of all five (5) out-of-school children globally, one (1) is a Nigerian. Nwoke, Oyiga, and Cochrane (2024) hold that the country's Basic Education Statistics established the number of out-of-school children aged 6 to 11 at 10 million, and an estimate of 10.2 million in 2022 (Nigeria Digest of Education Statistics, 2022). However, if the secondary school-aged children are included, the out-of-school population reaches an estimated 20 million.

Being out of school significantly increases children’s vulnerability to negative influences. Thus, children without skills and access to education face high risks of being recruited into criminal gangs or exploitation.

FINDINGS

The findings indicate that Nigeria is deeply immersed in state capture - a structural arrangement by the political class to influence policies and control the allocation of state resources for personal benefit. State capture in the Nigerian context is perpetuated by the elites through several mechanisms such as systematically weakening state institutions, electoral manipulation and violations of the rule of law.



CONCLUSION

The research has demonstrated that the Nigerian political elites, through systematic state capture, have entrenched a development crisis that disproportionately burdens the most vulnerable segments of society encompassing women, youth, and children. Through godfatherism, electoral manipulation, institutional weakening, and outright embezzlement of public resources, this minority class has effectively redirected the enormous wealth of the Nigerian state away from the common good towards personal gain. The consequences are severe and include soaring poverty rates, preventable maternal deaths, mass youth unemployment, and millions of children locked out of the school system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing these crises requires more than marginal policy adjustments. This study recommends a comprehensive overhaul of Nigeria's key institutions. The judiciary, anti-corruption agencies, electoral body, and legislature must be structurally reformed and sufficiently insulated from elite interference so they can function as genuine checks on power. Without strong, independent institutions capable of holding the political elites accountable, the cycle of capture, mismanagement, and underdevelopment will persist to the continued detriment of women, youth, and children. Nigeria's vast human and natural resources can only translate into meaningful development when the institutions meant to govern their allocation are genuinely independent and accountable.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions



Emmanuel Noble, Uche Henry Jacob, Sunday Nwali and Nwome Fidelia conceived the study, including the design, Emmanuel Noble Agu and Uche Henry Jacob collated the data, and also handled the analysis and interpretation, while the authors wrote the initial manuscript in parts. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used CHATGPT to correct the references to APA 7th edition. The author(s) carefully reviewed, revised, and verified all outputs generated by the tool and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript content.

Data availability statement

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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