PUBLIC POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Public policy implementation remains one of the most critical challenges confronting governance systems in developing countries, with Nigeria serving as a paradigmatic case of the gap between policy formulation and execution. This paper examines the challenges of public policy implementation in Nigeria, drawing on implementation theories and contemporary empirical evidence. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on a systematic documentary review of recent scholarly literature, statutes, government reports, and verified institutional datasets, analysed through thematic content analysis, and is anchored on the Top-Down and Bottom-Up implementation theories, supplemented by the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework and Easton's systems theory. Findings reveal that weak institutional capacity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, political interference, corruption, inadequate funding, poor monitoring and evaluation, and elite capture constitute major barriers to effective implementation. Deploying the 2023 fuel subsidy removal as the anchor case, supplemented by the Student Loan Scheme (2023/2024), the National Security Strategy (2019), and the Climate Change Act (2021), the paper situates Nigeria's experience against practices in Rwanda, Kenya, and South Africa. It concludes with strategies for strengthening implementation capacity, transparency, citizen participation, coordination, monitoring and evaluation, and policy continuity.

Keywords: *Governance, Implementation, Nigeria, Policy Process, Public Policy,*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A persistent gap exists between policy formulation and policy implementation in Nigeria. Governments routinely articulate ambitious development plans and reform programmes, yet their translation into tangible outcomes remains weak. Implementation scholarship has long established that policies rarely fail because of bad design; they fail because of poor execution (Abdallah, Abdulrazak & Abdulqadeer, 2025; Sukare & Usman, 2026). In Nigeria, this gap has manifested across virtually every sector. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest economy, has witnessed successive administrations formulate ambitious policies to address challenges ranging from poverty and unemployment to insecurity and infrastructure deficits. Yet the country still grapples with poor development indicators, persistent insecurity, and declining public trust. This paradox of policy abundance and implementation deficit constitutes the central puzzle this paper interrogates. The study's significance lies in its timeliness. The administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, which assumed office in May 2023, has introduced transformative policies including fuel subsidy removal, foreign exchange unification, and the Student Loan Scheme. These policies, while theoretically sound, have generated significant implementation challenges and mixed outcomes, providing fertile ground for scholarly analysis (Adenekan, Sule & Yakubu, 2025).

Notwithstanding this rich literature, three gaps justify the present study. First, existing Nigerian studies are largely sector-specific; few synthesize the post-2023 reform experience under the Tinubu administration. Second, much of the literature is descriptive, cataloguing challenges without adjudicating between competing explanations of why implementation interventions repeatedly fail. Third, the measurable early outcomes of recent reforms remain under-analysed , and Nigerian scholarship rarely situates the country's experience in comparative African perspective. This study addresses these gaps through a transparent documentary methodology combined with cross-case and cross-country comparison, moving from description to explanation. The study deploys the 2023 fuel subsidy removal as the anchor case for in-depth analysis, with three supplementary cases - student loans, national security, and climate change - selected for cross-sectoral validation.

The paper is structured into eight sections: methodology (Section 2); conceptual and theoretical framework (Section 3); the Nigerian policy environment (Section 4); implementation challenges and competing explanations of failure (Section 5); an in-depth anchor case (fuel subsidy removal), three supplementary cases, and African comparisons (Section 6); strategies for improvement (Section 7); and conclusion (Section 8).

3.1 Conceptual Clarifications

3.1.1 Public Policy

Public policy has been defined in various ways. Thomas Dye's classic formulation describes it as 'whatever governments choose to do or not to do,' a definition that remains the point of departure in contemporary policy scholarship (Potapovs, 2024). It can also be understood as a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern (Sukare & Usman, 2026). In this paper, public policy refers to the deliberate actions, decisions, and programmes of government aimed at addressing societal problems and achieving national development goals.

3.1.2 Policy Implementation

Implementation refers to the process of translating policy decisions into concrete actions and outcomes. Van Meter and Van Horn's classic model defines it as 'those actions by public and private individuals (or groups) that are directed at the achievement of objectives set forth in prior policy decisions,' a definition that continues to anchor implementation research (Abdallah, Abdulrazak & Abdulqadeer, 2025). Implementation involves multiple actors, including government agencies, civil servants, contractors, civil society organisations, and the target population (Ezeudu & Okolie, 2025).

3.1.3 Governance and Good Governance

Governance refers to the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators similarly conceive governance as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development (World Bank, 2024). In Nigeria, governance crises - including corruption, weak rule of law, and institutional decay - have historically undermined the implementation of well-intentioned policies (Yagboyaju, 2021; Ejalonibu, Ezenwajiobi & Udofa, 2026).

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The study adopts different theory to drive home this study. These theories include; Top-Down Implementation Theory, Bottom-Up Implementation Theory, Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) Framework and David Easton's Input-Output System Theory. The Top-Down approach, pioneered by Pressman and Wildavsky and eLabour ated by Mazmanian and Sabatier, views implementation as a hierarchical process where policy decisions made at the top are executed by subordinate agencies. It emphasises clear objectives, hierarchical control, and minimal deviation from policy goals. In Nigeria, the model is evident in federal directives to states and local governments, but it assumes a perfect chain of command that rarely exists in fragmented federal systems (Sukare & Usman, 2026).

The Bottom-Up approach, developed from Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy thesis and Hjern and Porter's implementation structures perspective, argues that implementation is shaped by the discretion of frontline officials and the networks of actors involved in service delivery. In Nigeria, the role of local government officials, traditional rulers, and community associations reflects bottom-up dynamics. The theory explains why policies are often distorted at the point of delivery (Abdallah, Abdulrazak & Abdulqadeer, 2025; Ezeudu & Okolie, 2025).

The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, developed by Elinor Ostrom and colleagues, provides a meso-level tool for understanding how institutions - defined as rules, norms, and strategies - affect policy outcomes, identifying three tiers of analysis: constitutional choice, collective choice, and operational choice. The framework draws attention to rules-in-use rather than rules-in-form. In Nigeria, formal rules often diverge sharply from the informal norms that actually govern bureaucratic behaviour, producing the dysfunction that multi-level governance research documents (Ezeudu & Okolie, 2025; Sukare & Usman, 2026).

David Easton's political system theory conceptualises the policy process as a system receiving inputs (demands and supports) from the environment, converting them through political institutions into outputs (policies and decisions), and generating feedback that influences subsequent inputs. The approach highlights the feedback loops often broken in Nigeria: citizen demands are frequently not translated into policy, outputs fail to generate positive feedback, and weak feedback mechanisms perpetuate implementation failures (Remigius, Obeche & Monwuba, 2025; Adenekan, Sule & Yakubu, 2025).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design based on a systematic documentary review, appropriate for synthesizing and critically evaluating existing evidence. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed articles on policy implementation in Nigeria and comparator African countries; primary legal and policy instruments, including the Student Loans (Access to Higher Education) Act 2024, the Climate Change Act 2021, the National Security Strategy 2019, and the 2024 Budget Implementation Report; and official records of the National Bureau of Statistics, Budget Office of the Federation, NELFUND, Transparency International, and SBM Intelligence.

4.0 THE NIGERIAN POLICY ENVIRONMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE

4.1 Constitutional and Structural Context

Nigeria operates a federal system with three tiers of government - federal, state, and local - each with constitutionally assigned functions. The 1999 Constitution (as amended) delineates legislative powers through the Exclusive, Concurrent, and Residual lists, but the federal government retains dominant control over fiscal resources through the Federation Account and oil revenue allocation. This fiscal imbalance creates implementation challenges, as states and local governments often lack the capacity to implement policies in their domains; about 25 states fund at least 80 per cent of their budgets from federal allocations (Robinson & Essien, 2026).

The civil service remains the primary implementing institution for public policies. However, decades of politicisation , poor remuneration, inadequate training, and brain drain have severely weakened bureaucratic capacity, while hierarchical rigidity and risk aversion discourage innovation. The Oronsaye Report (2012) highlighted significant institutional duplication and waste; although the Federal Executive Council approved implementation of its recommendations in February 2024, actual restructuring has proceeded slowly (Yagboyaju, 2021; Channels Television, 2024).

4.2 The Policy Process in Nigeria

The policy process in Nigeria is heavily executive-dominated. The President initiates most significant policies through executive orders, bills, or administrative directives, while the National Assembly's capacity for rigorous policy analysis remains limited. Policy formulation often occurs within closed circles of political elites, technocrats, and development partners, with limited participation from civil society, academia, or the public (Abdallah, Abdulrazak & Abdulqadeer, 2025).

A critical feature of the Nigerian policy environment is policy instability and discontinuity. Successive administrations have tended to abandon or modify the policies of their predecessors, even when such policies were yielding positive results. This discontinuity undermines institutional memory, wastes resources, and creates uncertainty among implementers. The failure-prone policy process thesis argues that policymakers in developing nations often set unrealistic goals, import foreign solutions unsuited to local contexts, and lack reliable information for evidence-based decision-making (Sukare & Usman, 2026; Adenekan, Sule & Yakubu, 2025).

4.3 Contemporary Policy Landscape (2021–2026)

The contemporary policy landscape is shaped by multiple crises: economic recession, debt distress, persistent insecurity, climate change impacts, and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Tinubu administration's agenda has focused on economic restructuring through subsidy removal, exchange rate unification, and fiscal consolidation, implemented with limited social protection buffers. The National Security Strategy (2019) remains the overarching security framework, yet implementation has been hampered by institutional weaknesses, resource constraints, and lack of political will (Remigius, Obeche & Monwuba, 2025).

5.0 CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN NIGERIA

5.1 Institutional and Administrative Challenges

5.1.1 Weak Institutional Capacity

Institutional capacity refers to the ability of organisations to perform their mandated functions effectively. In Nigeria, weak capacity manifests in inadequate staffing, poor infrastructure, obsolete technology, and insufficient technical skills. The National Council on Climate Change has struggled with lack of funding, unclear mandates, and limited skills at sub-national levels (Olujobi, 2024), while the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) has faced challenges due to insufficient frameworks for targeting, disbursement, and monitoring (Abdallah, Abdulrazak & Abdulqadeer, 2025).

5.1.2 Bureaucratic Inefficiencies and Red Tape

Civil servants, as street-level bureaucrats, exercise significant discretion in interpreting and applying policy rules. This discretion is often abused for rent-seeking, favoritism, and sabotage. Files are deliberately delayed to extract bribes, procurement processes are manipulated to favor connected contractors, and regulatory agencies are captured by the industries they are meant to regulate. The rigid adherence to outdated civil service rules stifles innovation, producing a procedure-bound implementation paralysis in which compliance with rules displaces the achievement of results (Yagboyaju, 2021).

5.1.3 Lack of Continuity and Institutional Memory

Frequent changes in leadership and administrative personnel disrupt implementation. New administrations often abandon existing policies and programmes, not because they were ineffective, but because they were associated with political opponents. The student loan scheme, for example, was announced in 2023 but faced significant delays due to institutional unpreparedness (Adenekan, Sule & Yakubu, 2025). The failure to build institutional memory means that lessons from past failures are not systematically captured or applied.

5.2 Political and Governance Challenges

5.2.1 Political Interference and Partisan Politics

Political interference occurs when elected officials, appointees, or party structures manipulate administrative processes for partisan advantage. The politicisation of the civil service, where appointments, promotions, and deployments are influenced by political loyalty rather than merit, undermines professional autonomy and implementation effectiveness. Political rascality - the reckless prioritisation of personal or party interests over public good - has been identified as a major barrier to policy implementation (Remigius, Obeche & Monwuba, 2025).

5.2.2 Corruption and Financial Diversion

Corruption is arguably the most significant impediment to policy implementation in Nigeria. Nigeria scored 26 out of 100 and ranked 142nd of 182 countries in the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2026). Public funds appropriated for implementation are routinely diverted through inflated contracts, ghost workers, and outright embezzlement. Although the EFCC recovered over N566 billion and more than $411 million between October 2023 and September 2025, such recoveries represent only a fraction of diverted resources (Channels Television, 2025; Ejalonibu, Ezenwajiobi & Udofa, 2026).

5.2.3 Elite Capture and Patronage Networks

Policy implementation in Nigeria is distorted by patronage networks and godfatherism, whereby appointments to key implementing agencies are made on the basis of political loyalty rather than merit and competence (Abdullahi, 2026). The federal character principle, designed to ensure ethnic balance, is often manipulated to justify the appointment of unqualified candidates, normalizing mediocrity and substandard performance across all tiers of government.

5.3 Economic and Resource Constraints
5.3.1 Inadequate Funding and Budgetary Constraints

Many policies are hampered by inadequate budgetary allocation and poor budget implementation. Capital budgets are often poorly funded, with releases falling far short of appropriations, while revenue shortfalls push funds toward recurrent expenditure and debt servicing rather than capital projects (BudgIT, 2024). The proliferation of agencies competing for limited resources further dilutes implementation capacity.

5.3.2 Debt Distress and Fiscal Crisis

Nigeria's fiscal crisis constrains implementation across all sectors. Debt servicing consumed about 69 per cent of federal revenue in 2024, down from 78 per cent in 2023, leaving limited fiscal space for capital investment and social programmes (Budget Office of the Federation, 2025). Olujobi (2024) similarly identifies a significant gap between the financial requirements of Nigeria's climate commitments and the resources actually mobilized.

5.4 Socio-Cultural and Environmental Challenges
5.4.1 Ethnicity, Religion, and Regionalism

Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity complicates policy implementation. Policies are sometimes perceived as benefiting particular groups, generating resistance from others, and the federal character principle has sometimes degenerated into quota systems that prioritise regional balance over competence. Ethnic tensions can escalate into violent conflicts that disrupt implementation, as seen in farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt and separatist agitations in the South-East (Remigius, Obeche & Monwuba, 2025).

5.4.2 Lack of Citizen Participation and Public Apathy

Nigeria's top-down policy culture often excludes citizens from policy formulation and implementation. Policies are designed in Abuja with little consultation with beneficiaries, leading to lack of ownership and public apathy. The failure to engage citizens means policies often fail to address real needs and lack the social legitimacy required for successful implementation (Abdallah, Abdulrazak & Abdulqadeer, 2025; Madekwe, 2025).

5.4.3 Climate Change and Environmental Stress

Environmental degradation, desertification, and climate change are increasingly recognised as implementation challenges. Climate-induced displacement intensifies resource competition and conflicts, disrupting agricultural and rural development programmes. The devastating 2022 floods affected over 30 states, killed 662 persons, and displaced about 2.4 million (Channels Television, 2023), yet Nigeria's institutional capacity for climate adaptation remains weak (Eke et al., 2025).

5.5 Why Implementation Reforms Repeatedly Fail: A Critical Synthesis

The challenges outlined above can be organised into three competing explanatory traditions. The state-capacity perspective locates failure in weak administrative capability (Yagboyaju, 2021; Ezeudu & Okolie, 2025). The political-economy perspective treats failure as rational elite behaviour: policies are distorted where patronage, godfatherism, and rent-seeking make subversion more profitable than compliance (Abdullahi, 2026; Ejalonibu, Ezenwajiobi & Udofa, 2026). The institutional-design perspective attributes failure to ambiguous goals, poor sequencing, and absent feedback loops (Adenekan, Sule & Yakubu, 2025).

Evaluated against Nigeria's record, no single explanation suffices. The sequencing failure of the 2023 subsidy removal supports the design perspective; the diversion and mistargeting of palliatives supports the political-economy perspective (Bemgba & Adadu, 2025); and the persistent under-funding of implementing agencies supports the capacity perspective (Amakiri & Arugu, 2025). Implementation failure is therefore over-determined: design flaws create opportunities, elite incentives exploit them, and weak capacity prevents correction.

6.0 CASE STUDIES OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN NIGERIA

This section deploys the 2023 fuel subsidy removal as the anchor case for in-depth analysis of policy implementation in Nigeria, and then reads three supplementary cases - the Student Loan Scheme, the National Security Strategy, and the Climate Change Act - against the patterns it establishes.

6.1 Anchor Case: Fuel Subsidy Removal and Economic Reforms (2023–2025)

The removal of fuel subsidies in May 2023 is deployed in this paper as the anchor case because it is the most consequential and best-documented economic policy of the Tinubu administration. By 2022, petrol subsidy expenditure had reached N4.39 trillion, exceeding the federal government's capital budget, with a further N3.36 trillion projected for January to June 2023 alone (BudgIT, 2023). The subsidy regime had also become a major source of rent-seeking, smuggling, and price arbitrage. Against this background, President Tinubu's inaugural declaration that 'subsidy is gone' on 29 May 2023 was intended to eliminate an unsustainable fiscal burden and redirect resources to infrastructure, health, education, and social protection.

The implementation process was, however, abrupt and poorly sequenced. The announcement took immediate effect without prior consultation with labour unions, manufacturers, transporters, or state governments; without a phased transition timetable; and without an operational social protection buffer. Mitigation measures - a N35,000 monthly wage award for federal workers, conditional cash transfers to 15 million vulnerable households, and compressed natural gas (CNG) initiatives - were designed and announced only after prices had already surged, and their rollout was slow and unevenly targeted (Kareem & Ajuwon, 2025; Olohigbe, Mamudu & Lipu, 2025).

The measurable outcomes were severe. The average pump price of petrol rose from N238 per litre in May 2023 to N546 by June 2023, and above N600 within weeks (BudgIT, 2023). Transportation costs rose by over 200%, food prices escalated, and headline inflation climbed from 28.9 per cent in December 2023 to 34.19 per cent by June 2024 (Kareem & Ajuwon, 2025). The palliatives were insufficient to cushion the shock for the 133 million Nigerians (63 per cent) who are multidimensionally poor (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Bemgba and Adadu (2025) found palliative distribution poorly targeted, while Ekpe, Nwinya, Ogwu and Ejukwe (2025) concluded that the reforms failed the utilitarian test of the greatest good for the greatest number.

Read through the study's theoretical lenses, the case is a textbook illustration of implementation failure. In top-down terms, a clear statutory objective was undermined by the absence of an adequate causal theory linking price liberalization to welfare protection. In bottom-up terms, the discretion of marketers, transporters, and local officials reshaped outcomes in ways federal designers neither anticipated nor controlled. In IAD terms, the formal rule change collided with the rules-in-use of Nigeria's fuel market - smuggling networks, arbitrage, and patronage - producing outcomes the formal rules did not intend. And in Eastonian terms, the broken feedback loop meant that citizen hardship generated no timely policy correction.

The anchor case therefore demonstrates that the central problem was not the policy's logic but its execution: sequencing that imposed costs before buffers existed, consultation that occurred after rather than before decisions, and institutional incapacity to deliver targeted relief at scale. These patterns provide the benchmark against which the three supplementary cases below are read.

6.2 Supplementary Case 1: The Student Loan Scheme

The Student Loan (Access to Higher Education) Act was first signed into law in June 2023 to provide interest-free loans to students in tertiary institutions. The policy was lauded as a transformative intervention to expand access to higher education and reduce the burden of tuition fees. However, implementation stalled almost immediately: institutional, legal, and funding defects forced a repeal and re-enactment in April 2024, which established the Nigerian Education Loan Fund (NELFUND) as a body corporate with a clearer governance and funding structure (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2024).

Following the re-enactment, implementation gained measurable traction: by October 2025, NELFUND had received 929,805 applications and disbursed N116.4 billion to 624,535 students across 239 public tertiary institutions (TVC News, 2025). Nevertheless, uptake remains below the eligible population, upkeep payments have been delayed, and the exclusion of private institution students has generated equity debates. The case illustrates the failure-prone policy process thesis: a well-intentioned policy imported without adequate adaptation to Nigeria's institutional context (Adenekan, Sule & Yakubu, 2025).

6.3 Supplementary Case 2: National Security Policy Implementation

Nigeria's National Security Strategy (NSS) 2019 provides a comprehensive framework for addressing terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and other security threats. The strategy emphasises a multi-dimensional approach combining military operations, intelligence gathering, border control, and socio-economic interventions. However, implementation has been predominantly militarised, with limited success in addressing the root causes of insecurity.

According to Remigius, Obeche and Monwuba (2025), institutional weaknesses, resource constraints, and lack of political will have hindered effective implementation of security policies. The security sector remains focused on regime protection rather than citizen-centered security; intelligence agencies are underfunded and poorly coordinated. The persistence of mass kidnappings - 4,722 victims across 997 incidents between July 2024 and June 2025 (SBM Intelligence, 2025) - demonstrates the gap between policy intent and implementation reality, while the non-military components of the NSS remain largely unimplemented.

6.4 Supplementary Case 3: Climate Change and Environmental Policy

The Climate Change Act 2021 represents Nigeria's most comprehensive environmental legislation, establishing the National Council on Climate Change and mandating carbon budgeting, emissions reduction, and climate finance mechanisms. Implementation has been slow and fragmented: Olujobi (2024) identifies barriers including lack of funding for the Council, unclear regulations, and limited technical skills at state and local levels, while Adenekan, Sule and Yakubu (2025) found that weak enforcement and low awareness constrain Nigeria's environmental legislation. The case demonstrates that legislative enactment does not translate to implementation without corresponding institutional, financial, and technical capacity.

6.5 Comparative Analysis of the Cases

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Selected Policy Implementation Cases in Nigeria

Policy (Year)	Lead Institutions	Stated Objective	Measurable Outcome (2025)	Dominant Constraint
Fuel Subsidy Removal (2023)	Federal Executive, NNPC Ltd., MDAs	Eliminate unsustainable subsidy expenditure (N4.39 trillion in 2022)	Pump price rose from N238 (May 2023) to above N600; inflation reached 34.19% (June 2024); palliatives poorly targeted	Poor sequencing; weak social protection
Student Loan Scheme (2023/2024)	NELFUND	Interest-free tuition and upkeep loans for indigent students	N116.4 billion disbursed to 624,535 students by October 2025; 2023 Act repealed and re-enacted in 2024	Institutional unpreparedness; funding sustainability
National Security Strategy (2019)	ONSA and security agencies	Coordinate response to terrorism, banditry, kidnapping	4,722 persons kidnapped in 997 incidents (July 2024-June 2025); N2.57 billion ransom paid	Inadequate funding; corruption; weak coordination
Climate Change Act (2021)	National Council on Climate Change	Legal framework for net-zero transition by 2060	Framework created but funding and enforcement lag; 2022 floods killed 662, displaced 2.4 million	Weak capacity; poor subnational uptake

The comparison yields four analytical insights. First, the design-implementation gap is consistent across sectors: objectives were clearly articulated but implementation instruments were weak. Second, outcomes deteriorate where sequencing ignores social context - the subsidy removal imposed costs before protective buffers existed, whereas the student loan scheme faltered because the implementing institution did not yet exist. Third, progress is greatest where a dedicated agency with ring-fenced funding exists

(NELFUND), and weakest where responsibility is diffuse across competing agencies (national security). Fourth, none of the cases embedded a functioning monitoring and evaluation system capable of triggering mid-course correction.

6.6 Lessons from Other African Countries: A Comparative Perspective

Nigeria's implementation challenges are not uniquely Nigerian, but their severity contrasts with better-performing African peers. Rwanda's Imihigo performance contracts - annual, publicly signed compacts between the President and local government leaders, tied to measurable targets and national rankings - have institutionalised results-based accountability (Ibrahim, 2022). Kenya's Huduma Centres have consolidated dozens of public services into one-stop shops with published service standards, achieving customer satisfaction above 90 per cent (Huduma Kenya, 2022). South Africa operates a statutory national evaluation system in which major policies are independently evaluated and tracked through improvement plans (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2024).

The governance contrast is quantifiable: in the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index, Rwanda and Botswana scored 58, Ghana 43, and South Africa 41, while Nigeria scored 26 and ranked 142nd of 182 countries (Transparency International, 2026; Ejalonibu, Ezenwajiobi & Udofa, 2026). Three lessons emerge. First, implementation succeeds where political leadership anchors accountability through visible performance contracts. Second, institutionalised monitoring and evaluation converts implementation from an administrative hope into a measurable obligation. Third, citizen-facing service standards create constituencies that defend implementation against elite capture. These practices require precisely the political will whose absence this paper has documented.

7.0 STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN NIGERIA

7.1 Institutional Reforms and Capacity Building

Strengthening institutional capacity requires comprehensive civil service reform focused on merit-based recruitment, competitive remuneration, continuous training, and performance management. The implementation of the Oronsaye Report recommendations, approved in February 2024, should be completed to eliminate duplication and overlap (Channels Television, 2024). Digital transformation of government processes e-government and e-procurement - can reduce bureaucratic delays and corruption opportunities, while independent policy evaluation units would enhance evidence-based decision-making (Sukare & Usman, 2026).

7.2 Enhancing Transparency and Accountability

Transparency mechanisms such as open budgeting, public procurement portals, and citizen feedback platforms can improve implementation accountability. The Freedom of Information Act should be fully authorisation, and anti-corruption agencies require genuine independence, adequate funding, and political protection. More effective implementation of the Treasury Single Account (TSA) and expanded use of Bank Verification Numbers (BVN) in government transactions can reduce financial leakages (Ejalonibu, Ezenwajiobi & Udofa, 2026).

7.3 Promoting Citizen Participation and Inclusive Governance

Policy implementation should be democratized through inclusive stakeholder engagement at all stages, including public hearings, community consultations, participatory budgeting, and citizen monitoring committees. Traditional institutions, religious leaders, and civil society organisations should be integrated as partners rather than passive recipients, building the trust that enhances compliance and co-production of public goods. The bottom-up approach suggests that empowering street-level bureaucrats and local communities improves adaptability and responsiveness (Abdallah, Abdulrazak & Abdulqadeer, 2025; Madekwe, 2025).

7.4 Improving Inter-Governmental Coordination

Effective implementation requires seamless coordination between federal, state, and local governments. This necessitates clarifying constitutional responsibilities, aligning fiscal transfers with functional assignments, and establishing joint planning and monitoring mechanisms. The National Economic Council (NEC) should function as a genuine platform for coordination rather than a ceremonial body, and sector-specific inter-governmental forums should be strengthened (Robinson & Essien, 2026).

7.5 Building Robust Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems should be institutionalised as integral components of implementation rather than afterthoughts. This requires clear performance indicators, baseline data, midterm reviews, and independent impact evaluations. The National Bureau of Statistics should be adequately funded and insulated from political interference, while digital M&E tools can enhance real-time monitoring. Evaluation results should feed directly into budget and personnel decisions, as institutionalised in South Africa's national evaluation system (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2024).

7.6 Ensuring Policy Continuity and Institutional Memory

Legislative entrenchment of key policies can protect them from arbitrary discontinuation by successive administrations. Policy documentation centres and knowledge management systems should capture lessons learned and best practices, and career civil servants rather than political appointees should occupy critical technical positions. The practice of new administrations reviewing and building upon existing policies - rather than wholesale abandonment - should be institutionalised (Adenekan, Sule & Yakubu, 2025).

8.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the challenges of public policy implementation in Nigeria, arguing that the gap between policy formulation and execution constitutes the central governance crisis of the Nigerian state. Drawing on top-down, bottom-up, and institutional analysis theories, the paper has demonstrated that implementation failure is not merely an administrative problem but a systemic governance challenge rooted in weak institutional capacity, political interference, corruption, inadequate funding, and socio-cultural fragmentation.

The anchor case of the fuel subsidy removal, read alongside the three supplementary cases, illustrates the diverse manifestations of implementation challenges across policy domains. The cross-case comparison revealed a consistent design-implementation gap, and the comparison with Rwanda, Kenya, and South Africa showed that Nigeria's failures are not inevitable: where political leadership anchors accountability, evaluation is institutionalised, and service standards are citizen-facing, implementation succeeds. In each Nigerian case, policy design was sound, but execution was undermined by institutional unpreparedness, poor sequencing, inadequate stakeholder engagement, and weak monitoring frameworks. The Tinubu administration's reforms demonstrate that policy success requires more than technical correctness - it demands political management, social protection, and institutional readiness.

The paper concludes that improving policy implementation in Nigeria requires a comprehensive governance reform agenda encompassing institutional capacity building, transparency and accountability, citizen participation, inter-governmental coordination, robust M&E systems, and policy continuity frameworks, driven by sustained political will. As Sukare and Usman (2026) argue, effective governance in Africa requires not only sound policy formulation but also strong institutional mechanisms capable of ensuring consistent and accountable execution.

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary and documentary sources; future research should employ primary data - including elite interviews and surveys of implementing officials - to generate original empirical evidence. The paper opens avenues for further investigation: comparative studies of implementation across Nigerian states, longitudinal analysis of policy continuity, and ethnographic studies of street-level bureaucratic behaviour. Ultimately, Nigeria's development depends not on the volume of policies enacted but on the quality of their implementation.

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