

African Journal of Development Studies (AJDS)

Published consistently since 2012
ISSN 2634-3630 E-ISSN 2634-3649

Indexed by IBSS, EBSCO, ERIH PLUS, COPERNICUS, ProQuest, SABINET
and J-Gate.

Volume 16, Number 2, June 2026
pp 357-375

Institutional Dynamics of Policy Making in Developing Societies: A Comparative Assessment of Nigeria and South Africa in the Last Two Decades

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3649/2026/v16n2a17>

O. Celestine Jombo

*Department of Public Administration,
Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Nigeria
greatcelexo@yahoo.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9380-2154>*

Omololu Fagbadebo

*Department of Public Management, Law and Economics
Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa
otomololu@yahoo.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0195-5189>*

Abstract

This paper examines the institutional dynamics of policymaking in Nigeria and South Africa over the last two decades, focusing on how political, economic, and social institutions shape public policies in critical sectors such as education, health, and economic development. The study employs a comparative approach, utilising both historical and rational choice institutionalism as theoretical frameworks to interrogate the evolution and current functioning of these nations' political and bureaucratic systems. The research employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on secondary data, case studies, and relevant literature, supplemented by interviews with key informants, including policy experts and political analysts. Findings reveal that both Nigeria and South Africa suffer from path-dependent institutional structures that perpetuate inefficiency and inequality, compounded by weak

accountability mechanisms and the pervasive influence of informal institutions. While South Africa has achieved comparatively greater progress in reforming its political institutions, Nigeria continues to contend with entrenched corruption and systemic bureaucratic dysfunction. The paper concludes that, despite shared challenges such as inequality, corruption, and governance crises, the institutional contexts in these two developing nations remain pivotal in determining the effectiveness of policy outcomes. Based on these findings, it proposes strengthening accountability mechanisms, integrating informal institutions into reform efforts, enhancing local-level governance, and improving the institutional capacity of political structures to drive systemic change.

Keywords: *Governance reforms, Institutional dynamics, Nigeria, Policy-making, South Africa*

Introduction

In recent decades, policymaking in developing societies has undergone significant transformations, driven by a combination of internal and external factors. In countries like Nigeria and South Africa, the evolution of political, economic, and social institutions has been shaped by a variety of forces, including globalisation, democratisation, and the increasing influence of international organisations. Although plagued by similar socio-economic pressures and governance deficits, the two countries have navigated these hurdles differently, yielding distinct legislative and developmental results (Aiyede, 2021; Booyen, 2021). Nonetheless, the role of institutions, both formal and informal, has remained central to understanding the successes and failures of public policy in these nations.

In developing societies, the institutional framework provides the underlying structure for policymaking. Institutions shape the processes through which policies are developed, debated, implemented, and evaluated. In Nigeria and South Africa, the influence of political institutions, governance frameworks, and bureaucratic systems on policy outcomes has been profound. Although deeply impacted by their respective histories of colonial rule and segregation, their administrative evolution split significantly during the post-independence era, leading to divergent governance models. Nigeria, with its multi-ethnic composition and burgeoning governance crisis, has struggled with weak institutional structures, which have undermined the implementation of effective public policies. On the other hand, South Africa's stable democratic institutions, built on the foundations of the post-apartheid transition, have allowed for more successful policymaking in specific sectors, despite enduring challenges of inequality and socio-economic development (Adeniran & Onabanjo, 2021).

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the institutional dynamics that have shaped policymaking in Nigeria and South Africa over the last two decades, focusing on understanding how political institutions, governance structures, and bureaucratic systems have influenced policy outcomes. These sectors are often at the forefront of policy debates in developing societies, as they directly affect citizens' well-being and the nation's overall development trajectory. In these countries, the interaction between formal and informal institutions plays a significant role in shaping the efficacy and inclusivity of policy-making processes.

The global context in which these countries operate cannot be ignored. Both countries have been influenced by international organisations, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United Nations, which have often pushed for market-oriented reforms and good governance practices. While these external pressures have occasionally succeeded in driving targeted policy changes, critics argue that they frequently ignore local realities, resulting in outcomes that fail to address the specific needs of the population (Khan, 2018).

The paper has five sections. The first part comprises the foregoing introduction and is followed by part two, which captures the literature review and explicates the major themes relevant to the substantive issues under review. The third part discusses the methodology adopted for the research. Part four discusses the research findings and examines the complex issues that define policymaking and implementation. The fifth part concludes the paper, proposing measures to strengthen the institutional contexts of policy-making in both Nigeria and South Africa and, by extension, the continent of Africa as a whole.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

Policymaking in developing societies has long been a subject of scholarly interest, with numerous studies examining how institutional contexts influence the creation, implementation, and outcomes of public policies. Research in this field has explored the role of political institutions, governance frameworks, bureaucratic systems, and informal networks in shaping policy decisions. While a substantial portion of the literature concentrates on broad trends across developing nations, comparative analyses of specific countries, particularly Nigeria and South Africa, provide far deeper insights into the distinct institutional dynamics operating within these two African states. This literature review synthesises and critiques

existing research on institutional dynamics in policy-making, compares the approaches, and identifies gaps that the current study aims to address.

Institutional Contexts and Governance in Developing Societies

Although the intersection of governance and policymaking is well-documented, the literature frequently overlooks how distinct state structures alter this relationship. Governance refers to the structures, processes, and interactions among state and non-state actors that shape decision-making (Rhodes, 2017). The emphasis is on the importance of institutional frameworks in facilitating or hindering effective policy implementation. Institutional capacity in shaping development outcomes is critical to effective policy implementation. This aligns with Grindle's (2004) assertion that effective governance structures are crucial to the success of development policies, particularly in countries with weak institutional frameworks. However, a critical approach to institutional analysis challenges the optimistic view of strong institutions. Chabal and Daloz (2019) argue that institutions in many African countries often fail to function effectively due to the prevalence of deep-rooted clientelism, patronage networks, and informal institutions that operate alongside formal governance structures. These informal systems, while often overlooked in traditional institutional analyses, can significantly shape policy outcomes.

The role of informal institutions in policy-making has been widely recognised in the literature, with scholars noting their dual nature. While informal institutions can enable flexibility and responsiveness to local needs, they can also perpetuate corruption, inequality, and exclusionary practices (Cleaver, 2012). Informal networks of patronage and political loyalty in Nigeria and South Africa are critical to understanding the policy-making process. Khan (2018) emphasises the significance of patronage networks in Nigeria, where political elites allocate resources and benefits through informal channels, frequently circumventing formal structures. While this informal influence can bypass bureaucratic inertia, it frequently yields skewed policy outcomes that fail to align with the broader public interest. The post-apartheid transition shaped South Africa's institutional landscape, with formal institutions and frameworks designed to promote democratic governance. However, the persistence of informal networks, through political party patronage, continues to affect policy-making (Beresford, 2020). Political loyalty and patronage systems shape key policy areas despite the country's robust democratic institutions.

A related dimension is the interaction between formal and informal institutions. Helmke and Levitsky (2022) argue that informal institutions can

either complement, substitute for, or undermine formal institutions, depending on their alignment. In Nigeria, informal networks often undermine formal policy-making through corruption, nepotism, and rent-seeking behaviours (Fagbadebo, 2020). In South Africa, while informal practices such as cadre deployment exist, they have not entirely displaced the formal governance mechanisms (De Jager, 2020). This dichotomy proves critical, as it confirms that formal systems do not operate in isolation; rather, their actual performance is consistently mediated by informal networks and underlying social expectations.

Another issue is the impact of governance frameworks and democratic consolidation on the policymaking process. Cheeseman (2022) notes that while Nigeria and South Africa hold regular elections, the quality of democracy characterised by the rule of law, accountability, and civil liberties differs significantly, affecting their respective policy environments. In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC)'s dominance has been challenged by robust opposition and a relatively free press and independent judiciary, thereby maintaining a degree of democratic accountability (Gumede, 2021). Conversely, Nigeria's democracy remains fragile, with electoral malpractices, judicial manipulation, and executive dominance that often undermine genuine democratic practice (Fagbadebo, 2020; Ibeanu & Orji, 2021).

Political Institutions and Policymaking

The role of political institutions in shaping policy has been a significant focus of institutional research. The political system in many developing societies is often characterised by a concentration of power in the executive, which can have both positive and negative effects on policy outcomes. Hyden (2017) notes that the executive branch frequently dominates African policymaking due to limited legislative capacity to enforce accountability. In South Africa, the post-apartheid constitution provides a system of checks and balances; the executive's influence over the legislative agenda remains strong, particularly under the African National Congress (ANC) government (Van der Westhuizen, 2018).

In Nigeria, the executive's dominance in the policy-making process is even more pronounced, as the presidency holds substantial control over both the legislative and bureaucratic branches (Fagbadebo, 2020). This dynamic accelerates policy execution but heavily promotes political patronage, directing decision-making toward rewarding political networks rather than achieving public objectives. Nwabuzor (2021) argues that

Nigeria's political institutions are highly personalised, with policy-making often revolving around the interests of the president and a small circle of elites.

The strength and independence of the legislative branch also play a critical role in shaping policy outcomes. In South Africa, the legislature plays a more significant role in the policy-making process by scrutinising government policies than in Nigeria, where the National Assembly has often been seen as ineffective at holding the executive accountable (Fagbadebo, 2019). Nigeria's National Assembly is frequently embroiled in internal conflicts and corruption scandals, hindering its ability to meaningfully engage in policy development (Jombo & Fagbadebo, 2019; Fagbadebo, 2020). Neo-patrimonialism, characterised by the blending of formal structures with informal patron-client relationships, remains a dominant feature in African governance, thereby weakening effective policy direction. In Nigeria, neo-patrimonial networks often supersede formal policy processes, leading to weak public sector reforms and inconsistent policy implementation (Fagbadebo, 2020). Conversely, South Africa has maintained stronger formal institutions since the democratic transition, fostering a more stable policy environment despite persistent patronage pressures (Fagbadebo, 2019).

External Influences on Policy-Making in Developing Nations

The influence of international organisations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, on national policy decisions shapes the policy environment. Kapstein (2020) argues that international financial institutions often exert considerable pressure on developing countries to adopt market-oriented reforms. In both Nigeria and South Africa, international actors have played a significant role in shaping economic policies, with varying degrees of success. In South Africa, international pressure for economic liberalisation in the 1990s was aligned with the country's domestic priorities of economic transformation and democratisation (Beresford, 2020). However, the influence of external actors in Nigerian policymaking remains contentious, as international organisations frequently mandate reforms that diverge from domestic political realities, and developmental priorities. Despite the influence of international organisations, the extent to which external pressures shape policy varies across the two countries.

Similarly, the influence of external factors, such as foreign donors and international development partners, on domestic policy-making has been a significant theme in recent literature. According to Harrison (2020), global

governance frameworks promoted by institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF have pushed African states toward neoliberal policy models, often at the expense of local realities. In Nigeria, the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) initiated in the 1980s, along with ongoing neoliberal reforms, have weakened state capacity in critical sectors, such as education and healthcare (Adeniran & Onabanjo, 2021). South Africa has demonstrated a relatively higher capacity to negotiate terms that align with national developmental goals (Marais, 2020). Nonetheless, both countries continue to grapple with balancing international pressures and local needs.

The literature has advanced the general understanding of institutional dynamics in African policy-making, but it suffers from several limitations, including overgeneralisation and macro-level analysis, a lack of sector-specific comparative analysis, and insufficient integration of informal institutions, including a failure to link governance variables to concrete policy outcomes. While macro-level studies provide valuable broad insights, they often overlook the micro-dynamics of institutional interactions at the sectoral or subnational levels.

Theoretical Explications

This paper adopts the new institutionalism theoretical framework, particularly historical institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism, to interrogate the institutional dynamics of policy-making in Nigeria and South Africa. New institutionalism emerged in response to the behavioural revolution of the mid-20th century, emphasising the central role of institutions, not merely as background structures but as active determinants of political behaviour and policy outcomes (Peters, 2020). Beyond formal frameworks, institutions operate as networks of embedded norms and practices, fundamentally conditioning the decision-making environments of strategic actors.

Historical Institutionalism focuses on how institutions evolve, emphasising path dependency and critical junctures. According to Pierson (2021), once institutions are established, they create self-reinforcing patterns that make substantial change difficult except during moments of significant disruption. Key constructs in historical institutionalism include path dependency, critical junctures, and institutional layering. Path dependency suggests that early policy decisions set countries on trajectories that become difficult to deviate from due to increasing returns and reduced costs. Critical junctures represent periods of significant institutional choice, typically precipitated by crises, which disrupt path dependency and permit radical

structural change. Institutional layering describes a gradual process in which new rules and norms are grafted onto existing structures over time, leading to incremental transformation.

The strength of this framework lies in its ability to explain the persistence of institutional arrangements even in the face of suboptimal outcomes, providing valuable insights into why Nigeria and South Africa, despite reforms and democratisation, continue to struggle with policy inefficiencies (Thelen, 2020). Emphasis on long-term trajectories provides a succinct understanding of the persistence of institutional weaknesses, even after regime change or constitutional reforms. However, a key limitation is its structural determinism. Critics argue that historical institutionalism often underestimates the role of agency, particularly the capacity of actors to alter institutions through strategic action (Mahoney & Thelen, 2020). Moreover, the framework sometimes struggles to explain periods of rapid institutional change that do not follow from prior trajectories.

Rational choice institutionalism provides a more actor-centred perspective, positing that individuals are rational actors who strategically navigate institutional constraints to maximise their preferences (Shepsle, 2021). Thus, institutions are seen as sets of rules that structure incentives and opportunities, shaping behaviour by altering the costs and benefits of different actions. Some of the core constructs of rational choice institutionalism include strategic calculation, principal-agent relations, and collective action problems. In institutional analysis, strategic calculation describes how actors evaluate their options and select a course of action by weighing formal rules against the expected reactions of other players. Principal-agent theory explains the delegation of authority within institutions, often highlighting issues such as moral hazard and information asymmetry. Collective action problems address the difficulties groups face in coordinating for mutual benefit under institutional constraints.

This framework provides a precise and clear explanation of how institutional rules influence individual behaviour (Immergut, 2021). It provides a strong analytical framework for unpacking how political actors, policymakers, and bureaucrats navigate institutional environments, making it highly applicable for examining the micro-dynamics of policy-making in Nigeria and South Africa. However, a significant weakness of this framework is its assumption of hyper-rationality; it often overlooks actors' bounded rationality and the influence of norms, cultures, and informal practices on decision-making (Peters, 2020). Moreover, it tends to treat institutions as static rather than dynamic, which can be problematic in evolving political contexts, particularly in developing societies.

The use of a blend of historical institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism in this paper is both deliberate and strategic. Each tradition compensates for the other's weaknesses. While the former provides the broader historical and structural context, the latter injects an agency-oriented analysis that focuses on actors' strategic behaviours within institutional constraints. This analytic eclecticism offers a more comprehensive understanding of institutional dynamics by integrating structure and agency (Sil & Katzenstein, 2019).

Applying this dual framework to Nigeria and South Africa allows for a layered analysis. Historical institutionalism helps to explain why Nigeria's postcolonial state continues to exhibit weak governance despite repeated attempts at reforms. Early colonial structures' emphasis on extraction over governance, coupled with post-independence military dominance, set a path-dependent trajectory that promotes neo-patrimonial practices in Nigeria (Olowu, 2020). Similarly, apartheid's centralised authoritarian structures and the ANC's post-apartheid dominance in South Africa offer plausible explanations for the resilience of political patronage (Booyesen, 2021). These historical paths shape contemporary institutional environments, making specific policy outcomes more likely than others.

Rational choice institutionalism explicates how political actors in both countries navigate institutional landscapes to further their interests. Viewing Nigeria's patronage networks as a principal-agent dilemma highlights how a lack of strict accountability allows public officials to divert state resources to clients rather than fulfilling their mandates to citizens. Principals (voters and political leaders) delegate authority to agents (bureaucrats and local officials), who then pursue personal or factional interests under weak oversight (Aiyede, 2021). Similarly, in South Africa, strategic calculations by political elites to maintain party dominance have influenced decisions on public-sector appointments and service-delivery strategies (Fakir, 2020).

Applying these theories also demands sensitivity to context-specificities. While rational choice institutionalism's successfully clarifies elite behaviour through the lens of strategic calculation, the framework must be adapted to integrate the profound influence of informal norms and cultural values in both countries. Likewise, historical institutionalism's broad focus on continuities must be calibrated to recognise instances of strategic agency where actors defy institutional expectations, such as civil society-led constitutional reforms in South Africa or judicial activism in Nigeria (Nwosu, 2022).

Thus, the blended theoretical framework enables this study to explore not only why institutional weaknesses persist but also how actors

strategically navigate or reinforce them across different sectors. It situates policymaking within a historically contingent but actor-mediated process, providing a richer, more dynamic understanding of institutional dynamics in developing societies.

Research Methodology

The paper employed a qualitative comparative methodology to explore the institutional dynamics of the policy process in the last two decades. The comparative case study approach is appropriate for examining how different institutional contexts shape policy outcomes. This enabled an in-depth exploration of the policy environments. The paper uses a combination of thematic content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and comparative analysis as its primary research methods. Thematic content analysis forms a cornerstone of this methodology, providing a structured framework to evaluate and interpret official policies, government publications, and administrative records. To complement the document analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 44 purposively selected key stakeholders in the policy-making process, comprising 24 in Nigeria and 20 in South Africa. These stakeholders include government officials, policy experts, academics, and representatives from civil society organisations. The comparative approach was used to identify the similarities and differences in the countries' institutional dynamics. The analysis focused on how each country's political institutions and governance frameworks shape policy-making across key sectors.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of institutional dynamics in Nigeria and South Africa over the last two decades reveals both convergence and divergence in how institutions shape policy outcomes. A comparative assessment of key sectors, including health, education, and economic development, revealed critical patterns of historical path dependency, actor strategy, institutional resilience, and reform inertia. These findings are contextualised within the dual framework of historical rational choice institutionalism, allowing for a layered understanding of continuity and change in policy making and implementation.

Enduring Institutional Legacies and Path Dependency

Both Nigeria and South Africa exhibit strong evidence of path dependency in their institutional evolution, corroborating the central proposition of historical institutionalism (Pierson, 2021). In Nigeria, governance structures during colonialism emphasised resource extraction and authoritarian administrative control, establishing a legacy of centralised yet fragmented authority (Olowu, 2020). The transition through independence and repeated military rule solidified these institutional pathologies, making the implementation of current administrative reforms exceptionally challenging. The health and education sectors, for example, have consistently suffered from weak decentralised governance and duplication of mandates across federal, state, and local levels (Adebayo & Oduola, 2020; Ogunleye et al., 2021).

In South Africa, the institutional designs of the apartheid regime favoured centralisation and racial exclusion, embedding inequalities deeply into the fabric of public policy frameworks (Booyesen, 2021). Despite the democratic transition in 1994, the post-apartheid government has faced persistent challenges in redistributing resources and reforming institutions that were initially designed to sustain minority rule. The education sector starkly illustrates this continuity; while formal apartheid laws were dismantled, inequalities in school infrastructure, teacher quality, and resource allocation remain highly racialised (Spaull, 2020). Thus, the findings highlight that path-dependent structures continue to shape contemporary policy-making. Even when political leadership changes, institutions themselves exert an inertial force, resisting transformative reform unless moments of critical juncture, such as a significant political crisis, are fully exploited.

Strategic Agency and Institutional Navigation

While structural inertia is powerful, it does not render actors powerless. Evidence from both countries shows that political elites, bureaucrats, and stakeholders engage in strategic navigation of institutional constraints, aligning with rational choice institutionalism's emphasis on actor behaviour (Shepsle, 2021).

In Nigeria, federal-state relations often devolve into strategic bargaining rather than cooperative federalism. State governments, recognising the weak enforcement mechanisms at the federal level, often divert funds meant for health and education initiatives to patronage networks (Aiyede, 2021).

Similarly, to bypass institutional deficiencies, civil servants frequently establish informal networks to fast-track decisions; whilst this maintains basic public services, it often intensifies systemic corruption (Ogunleye et al., 2021).

South African political elites, notably within the ruling ANC, have strategically utilised institutional rules to consolidate power through mechanisms, especially cadre deployment (Fakir, 2020). This intervention, though meant to secure bureaucratic commitment to democratic goals, has compromised merit-based appointments and institutional transparency, severely impacting sectors dependent on specialised knowledge such as health and education, where professional expertise is crucial. Nonetheless, South African civil society organisations and the judiciary have demonstrated notable agency in challenging maladministration, illustrating the potential for actors outside formal political institutions to influence policy trajectories (Nwosu, 2022).

Sector-Specific Institutional Resilience and Weakness

The sectoral analysis reveals overt differences in institutional resilience between Nigeria and South Africa, shaped by historical legacies, actor strategies, and external pressures across the three key sectors under review. Under the key sector in Nigeria, attempts to implement a universal health coverage model have repeatedly failed due to institutional fragmentation and elite capture (Ogunleye et al., 2021). The National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), launched to expand healthcare access, has been plagued by low enrolment rates, corruption scandals, and a lack of integration among different government levels. This suggests that institutional designs have not been sufficiently effective in deterring opportunistic behaviour among bureaucrats and political appointees (Field Study, 2025).

By contrast, South Africa's health sector has shown comparatively greater resilience. Although the sector faces challenges such as resource constraints and public-sector inefficiencies, it has maintained a relatively robust institutional foundation inherited from pre-1994 health infrastructure (Hiil & Hendricks, 2020). Moreover, South Africa's experience with HIV/AIDS activism forced institutional reforms that enhanced transparency and responsiveness, indicating that external societal pressure can counterbalance internal institutional weaknesses.

In the education sector, Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme has similarly been undermined by institutional fragmentation, lack of accountability, and political interference at sub-national levels (Adebayo & Oduola, 2020). Despite substantial investments and donor

support, implementation failures persist, revealing a significant principal-agent problem where agents, such as local administrators, divert funds or prioritise political loyalty over educational outcomes. South Africa, while also struggling with educational inequality, has achieved greater policy stability through structured provincial administration, even though inter-provincial disparities remain stark (Spaull, 2020). Reforms such as the National Development Plan (NDP) have provided strategic frameworks that link education goals to broader socio-economic development strategies, although implementation gaps persist.

Institutional deficiencies within the policy-making process are significantly more visible in Nigeria's economic development sector than in South Africa's. In Nigeria, over the last two decades, frequent policy reversals, regulatory inconsistencies, and political patronage have hindered sustainable economic reforms, particularly in sectors such as energy and infrastructure (Olowu, 2020). Despite enduring political instability, severe economic inequality, and the profound disruption caused by state capture, South Africa has managed to sustain a stable and predictable regulatory framework that continues to attract foreign direct investment (Booyesen, 2021). Therefore, these sectoral comparisons clearly affirm that while both countries face governance challenges, the resilience or weakness of institutions varies significantly depending on historical investment, actor agency, and societal engagement.

The Impact of Informal Institutions

A significant contribution of this study is the demonstration that informal institutions—specifically unwritten rules, patronage networks, and societal norms—pervasively condition formal policy processes. Informal patronage structures in Nigeria often supplant formal rules, thereby undermining the constitutionally inspired transparency and accountability mechanisms (Aiyede, 2021). In South Africa, although the formal rule of law is stronger, informal political practices like cadre deployment and factional politics significantly shape public policy outcomes (Fakir, 2020). This finding has exposed the inadequacy of formal-institutional analyses and highlights the need for future policy reform strategies to account for the entrenchment of informal norms within formal systems, especially in developing societies.

Windows of Opportunity and Critical Juncture

The findings offer rare windows for institutional transformation; however, these opportunities are often squandered. In Nigeria, the transition to democracy in 1999 marked a critical juncture. However, the failure to dismantle entrenched neo-patrimonial networks limited the potential for institutional reforms (Olowu, 2020). In South Africa, the 1994 democratic transition initially spurred significant institutional redesigns. However, post-transition consolidation of the ANC's dominance gradually eroded the momentum of the reforms (Booyesen, 2021). This underscores that shifts in governance alone cannot reshape institutions unless strategic actors actively utilise these pivotal moments to drive deep-rooted legislative and operational overhauls.

Conclusion

The persistence of path-dependent trajectories, such as centralisation of authority, weak accountability frameworks, and systemic inequality, demonstrates the continued salience of colonial and apartheid-era institutional arrangements in the two countries (Pierson, 2021; Olowu, 2020). In Nigeria, colonial governance models that emphasised extractive and centralised control laid the foundation for bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption, a legacy further compounded by decades of military rule (Adebayo & Oduola, 2020). In South Africa, apartheid's institutional entrenchment of racial exclusion continues to manifest in educational and health disparities despite extensive democratic reforms (Booyesen, 2021). Simultaneously, findings confirm that institutions are not merely structures that constrain action; they are dynamic arenas where strategic actors operate to either reinforce or undermine systemic reforms. Political elites, bureaucrats, and civil society actors in both countries strategically navigate institutional frameworks, often exploiting weaknesses for personal or political gain (Shepsle, 2021; Fakir, 2020). The rational choice institutionalism framework, therefore, provides a complementary lens by highlighting the agency embedded within seemingly rigid institutional structures.

A significant insight from the study is the powerful influence of informal institutions on formal policy-making processes. Patronage networks, cadre deployment, and informal bargaining systems frequently subvert formal rules and expectations in both Nigeria and South Africa, suggesting that effective reform strategies must address not only legal-institutional reforms but also societal norms and political cultures (Aiyede, 2021; Nwosu, 2022).

Moreover, the democratic transitions in both nations acted as double-edged swords, driving major institutional reforms whilst simultaneously exposing new systemic vulnerabilities. While such moments offer rare opportunities for systemic transformation, their potential is easily dissipated without sustained strategic action from the reformist coalitions (Booyesen, 2021; Ogunleye et al., 2021).

Overall, while South Africa demonstrates greater institutional resilience than Nigeria, both countries face governance challenges rooted in institutional inertia, strategic manipulation, and the enduring power of informal structures. These findings underscore the complexity of institutional reform in developing societies and highlight the need for more deliberate, context-specific approaches to governance improvement. By systematically incorporating the pervasive influence of informal institutions (patronage, cadre deployment) on policy outcomes in both countries and conducting a detailed, sector-specific comparison, the paper moves beyond the limitations of macro-level analysis and generalisation through its successful employment of analytic eclecticism.

Recommendations

Given these findings, this paper recommends some policy actions to enhance the policy process and strengthen the countries' accountability mechanisms. Reinforcing accountability frameworks will boost institutional resilience. Bolstering the independent status, operational capacity, and enforcement capabilities of existing oversight bodies is crucial for ensuring rigorous accountability across both political branches of government. In South Africa, the Chapter 9 institutions, particularly the Public Protector, should be strengthened to make binding, independent decisions, as envisaged by Section 182(1c), with consequential remedial action. In other words, there is a need to ensure that the Public Protector's remedial action is binding and not subject to parliamentary review, thereby strengthening accountability. Similarly, in Nigeria, the anti-corruption agencies, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), should be devoid of executive control and interference. They should cease being used by the executive as instruments of political vendetta and prioritise promoting accountability in their investigations and actions. Operational independence through fiscal autonomy would enhance transparent oversight actions.

Policy stakeholders in the two countries should adopt strategies that strengthen the actual public participation in the policy process by

incorporating community and traditional leaders into the official decision-making echelon. This will nurture a shared sense of community and reinforce a collective commitment to public accountability. Reliance on the formal sector is likely to have a limited impact if the informal structures that sustain maladministration are not mitigated (Hiil & Hendricks, 2020; Nwosu, 2022). Building subnational institutional capacity is necessary to strengthen public participation. This remains essential to guarantee that service delivery is impartial and that development benefits are shared inclusively (Ogunleye et al., 2021; Spaull, 2020). Nigeria needs to recalibrate intergovernmental relations, emphasising more explicit role definitions, greater financial autonomy, and stricter monitoring of transferred responsibilities in critical sectors such as education and health. South Africa, with relatively functional provincial governments, must address inter-provincial disparities through targeted capacity-building initiatives, particularly in historically disadvantaged provinces. The countries need to address rampant corruption in government and ensure strict adherence to the rule of law.

Nigeria and South Africa have suffered from policy instability, reversals, and inconsistencies that sometimes erode institutional credibility (Booyesen, 2021; Olowu, 2020). Thus, there is a need to promote policy coherence and stability by establishing bipartisan, long-term development plans that bind successive administrations through legal and constitutional frameworks. The countries' National Development Plans should be insulated from partisan politics. A stable policy environment not only strengthens institutions but also enhances investor confidence, service delivery, and developmental outcomes. To accomplish the above, there is a need for professionalised bureaucracy. Research has shown that countries with highly professionalised civil services experience more consistent and effective policy outcomes (Adebayo & Oduola, 2020; Fakir, 2020). Professionalisation should include competency-based recruitment and talent retention, bolstered by continuous training and effective performance management systems.

References

- Adebayo, A. M., & Oduola, O. (2020). Universal Basic Education in Nigeria: Policy challenges and prospects. *African Educational Research Journal*, 8(1), 12–20.
<https://doi.org/10.30918/AERJ.81.20.016>

- Adeniran, A. I., & Onabanjo, B. O. (2021). The Neoliberalism Dilemma in Nigeria's Governance: Policy Inconsistencies and Reform Reversals. *Review of African Political Economy*, 48(167), 30–48.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2020.1837292>
- Aiyede, E. (2021). Patronage, clientelism, and the political economy of governance reforms in Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 120(480), 650–673.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adab031>
- Beresford, A. (2020). Power, patronage, and policy-making in South Africa. *African Affairs*, 119(475), 367–389.
- Booth, D., Cammack, D., McCormick, D., & Kelsall, T. (2018). Governance and development in Africa: Reframing the research agenda. *Development Policy Review*, 36(4), O1-O12.
- Booyesen, S. (2021). The dynamics of South Africa's political institutions: Governance, reform, and challenges in the post-apartheid state. *African Journal of Governance and Development*, 9(3), 24-39.
<https://doi.org/10.21797/ajgd.7859>
- Chabal, P., & Daloz, J. P. (2019). *Africa works: Disorder as political instrument*. Indiana University Press.
- Cheeseman, N. (2022). *Democracy in Africa: Successes, failures, and the struggle for political reform* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cleaver, F. (2012). *Development through bricolage: Rethinking institutions for natural resource management*. Routledge.
- De Jager, N. (2020). Cadre deployment and its impact on governance in South Africa. *South African Journal of Political Studies*, 47(2), 125–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2019.1657314>
- Fagbadebo, OM. (2019). An Overview of Legislative Oversight and Accountability Mechanisms in Nigeria and South Africa. In OM Fagbadebo and FA Ruffin (eds.) *Perspectives on the Legislature and the Prospects of Accountability in Nigeria and South Africa*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, pp. 19-44.
- Fagbadebo OM. (2020). *Impeachment in the Nigerian Presidential System: Challenges, Successes and the Way Forward*. Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://bit.ly/332d5AQ> ISBN: 978-981-15-6040-8; eISBN: 978-981-15-6041-5
- Fakir, E. (2020a). Cadre deployment and political patronage in South Africa's public sector: An assessment of its impact on service delivery. *Journal of Public Policy and Administration*, 35(5), 678-692.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3567886>

- Fakir, E. (2020b). Party dominance, state capture and the democratic deficit in South Africa. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 38(4), 481–496. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2020.1810864>
- Gumede, W. (2021). Political accountability and the future of democracy in South Africa. *African Journal of Democracy and Governance*, 8(1), 10–29.
- Harrison, G. (2020). Neoliberalism and governance in Africa: Beyond the post-Washington consensus. *African Affairs*, 119(477), 163–184. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adz023>
- Helmke, G., & Levitsky, S. (2022). *Informal Institutions and Democracy: Lessons from Latin America*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hiil, L., & Hendricks, F. (2020). Institutional responses to public health crises in South Africa: Lessons from HIV/AIDS activism. *Global Health Governance Journal*, 14(2), 116–130. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3475907>
- Hyden, G. (2017). The governance turn: Challenges and opportunities for development studies. *World Development*, 99, 155–166.
- Ibeanu, O., & Orji, N. (2021). Democratic consolidation in Nigeria: Progress, problems and prospects. *African Affairs*, 120(479), 512–534. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adab008>
- Immergut, E. M. (2021). Institutionalism and public policy: A reassessment. *Policy Studies Journal*, 49(S1), S19–S43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12400>
- Jombo, O.C. & Fagbadebo, O. (2019). Integrity Deficit as an Impediment to Effective Legislative Oversight in Nigeria. In O. Fagbadebo & F. Ruffins (eds.), *Perspectives* Springer International Publishing AG, pp.123–142.
- Kapstein, E. B. (2020). Global governance and development. *World Politics Review*, 12(3), 45– 58.
- Khan, M. H. (2018). *Governance and development: The political economy of development in Africa*. Oxford University Press.
- Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (2020). *Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Marais, H. (2020). *South Africa Pushed to the Limit: The Political Economy of Change*. Zed Books.
- Mkandawire, T. (2021). Thinking about developmental states in Africa. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 45(2), 353–373. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/beaa033>
- Moyo, T., & Makaza, D. (2017). Policy implementation in South Africa: Successes and challenges. *African Journal of Governance and Development*, 6(1), 72–90.

- Nwabuzor, A. (2021). Personalized governance and policy-making in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Political Science*, 26(2), 41–57.
- Nwosu, P. (2022). Reforming public administration: The role of civil society in shaping governance in Nigeria and South Africa. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 88(2), 324-338. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852322110166>
- Ogunleye, O. A., Adebayo, O. S., & Yusuf, S. (2021). Policy challenges in Nigeria's healthcare sector: Structural inefficiencies and institutional barriers to reform. *Journal of African Public Policy*, 47(3), 501-516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20421329.2021.1890352>
- Olowu, D. (2020). Path dependency and the challenge of governance reforms in Nigeria. *African Journal of Political Science*, 15(4), 298-312. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aps.2020.0143>
- Peters, B. G. (2020). *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The New Institutionalism* (4th ed.). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Pierson, P. (2021). Historical institutionalism in comparative politics. In *Comparative Politics: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (pp. 51-75). Oxford University Press.
- Resnick, D., & Thurlow, J. (2022). Political coalitions and development strategies in Africa. *World Development*, 145, 105519. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105519>
- Shepsle, K. A. (2021). *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior and Institutions* (3rd ed.). W.W. Norton & Company.
- Shepsle, K. A. (2021). Rational choice institutionalism: Theories of institutional dynamics and actor behaviour. *Journal of Political Theory*, 45(1), 87-104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpt.2020.11.004>
- Sil, R., & Katzenstein, P. J. (2019). *Beyond Paradigms: Analytical Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Spaull, N. (2020). Education inequality in South Africa: From apartheid to the present day. *South African Journal of Education*, 40(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v40n1a1451>
- Van der Westhuizen, J. (2018). South Africa's foreign policy and the politics of regional leadership. *African Affairs*, 117(468), 408–427.