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Poverty alleviation programmes and ruralization of corruption in Nigeria: A case study of Community and Social Development Programme (CSDP) in Edo State

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Abstract

Despite being endowed with an abundance of material and human resources, Nigeria still experiences growing poverty indexes and effects that include malnutrition, inflation, mortality rate, school dropouts, and lack of access to basic infrastructure. Past governments tried to address these challenges by introducing various forms of poverty alleviation programmes, particularly in rural areas. Yet, the programmes failed to achieve the expected outcomes with numerous factors adduced as reasons for their failures. Prominent among the reasons was the adoption of a top-down approach that prioritized corruption, elite primitive accumulation, and project abandonment, which culminated in the continuous impoverishment of the Nigerian people; hence, the adoption of a CSDP-driven bottom-up approach that prioritizes community participation. The objective of this study was to examine whether the widespread corruption that previously hindered the success of programs is still evident in this current program. The study deployed the elite theory to demonstrate elite sabotage of poverty alleviation initiatives in the Nigerian rural areas. The study employed an in-depth interview to gather responses from 109 participants knowledgeable about the various CSDPs located across the selected communities. The participants were selected using both simple random and snowball sampling techniques. The paper found that in the planning and implementation of CSDPs, two forms of corruption were manifest - power politics and fund mismanagement. These two forms of corruption were mutually exclusive and exposed the symbiotic relationship that existed between the state (elites) and the society in the politics of corruption in Nigeria. The study, therefore, recommends that the government encourage the participation of whistleblowers, civil society organizations, the media, the police, and the judiciary in anti-corruption efforts in rural areas of Edo State and, by extension, Nigeria.

Introduction

Since its creation, Nigeria's nomenclature has been associated with corruption, which has escalated in patterns and degrees. Likewise, Nigeria's corruption literature has often implicated indigenous political elites and foreign actors who often collaborate to rip the nation apart when their interests intersect (Hoffmann & Patel, 2023; Smith, 2018). For instance, the Transparency International (2023) ranked Nigeria 145th out of 180 countries as the least corrupt. This also showed that from 1996 to 2023, Nigeria's corruption ranking averaged 126.36, reaching a high of 154.00 in 2021. Moreover, according to the World Justice Project (2023), since

Nigeria's independence, the prevalence of corruption has cost the economy at least $550 billion. The report also stated that in 2021 alone, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), a body constitutionally tasked with investigating financial impropriety in Nigeria, recovered at least $750 million from fraudulent individuals. The report implicated leaders, judges, foreign companies, and professionals in acts of bribery and abuse of power that undermined accountability, transparency, and an equitable justice system for the vulnerable groups.

While it is widely assumed that corruption in Nigeria occurs primarily in publicly visible spaces—such as government offices, economic hubs like the Niger Delta region, hospitals, and religious centers—because of the large financial inflows and outflows that create opportunities for financial misconduct and attract potential scrutiny from the media and civil society groups (Edeh & Nwakanma, 2017; Page, 2018), comparatively little attention has been paid to corruption in rural areas. When discussed, rural corruption is often framed only in relation to the diversion of funds for rural development by high-profile personalities or interest groups. As a result, bottom-up forms of politics in rural areas, including those involving local authorities and influential community figures, have frequently been overlooked.

Several factors may explain this apparent lack of research attention. First, the remoteness of rural areas makes the investigation and reporting of financial malpractice and embezzlement particularly complex. Second, the patron–clientelist relationships that exist between public authorities—such as ministers, commissioners, legislators, or governors—and contractors on the one hand, and rural authorities—such as local government chairmen, traditional rulers, village chiefs, and community heads—on the other hand, often go unnoticed. These local authorities frequently serve as intermediaries between the state and rural populations. Finally, there is the widespread disbelief that rural people, who are among the most poverty-stricken, could knowingly perpetuate their own impoverishment through financial corruption. Indeed, the most impoverished Nigerians are concentrated in rural areas (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Given these dynamics, it is reasonable to ask how some rural communities could divert funds meant for their own development. The lack of scholarly attention to rural corruption in Nigeria, particularly in the context of poverty alleviation programs, is the key motivation for this paper.

Poverty alleviation has been the policy objective of every government in Nigeria. This is a result of the growing poverty level in rural areas. For instance, the National Bureau of Statistics (2022) reported that 63% of Nigerians, comprising 133 million people, are multi-dimensionally poor, while 70% of the poor reside in rural areas. The World Bank (2022) reported that two-thirds (67.5%) of children between the ages of 0 and 17 are the most affected by multidimensional poverty in Nigeria. As a result, various administrations have attempted to improve the lives of the rural people through various intervention programmes such as the National Policy on Rural Development (2004), the Green Revolution Programme (1980), Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) (1986), Rural Infrastructural Development Scheme (RIDS), National Rural Roads Development Fund (NRRDF) and recently, Community and Social Development Pogramme (CSDP), a focus of this paper (Ahmed et al., 2021).

In implementing these programs, the government partnered with the private sector and international donor agencies, such as the World Bank, to ensure equity, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. However, the adoption of a top-down approach that prioritized a state-centric approach over a community-driven approach drowned the objectives these programmes were designed to achieve. The state-centric approach led to corruption that either left the programs completely unachieved or abandoned (Ochepo, 2019).

For instance, the EFCC uncovered a total sum of over N37 billion allegedly laundered by the Former Minister of Humanitarian Affairs, Sadiya Umar-Farouk. The money, which was intended for development in the health, educational, and agricultural sectors in rural areas, was allegedly diverted from the Federal government's coffers to multiple private accounts. Her successor, who had been in office for barely a year, was also indicted for financial corruption in the amount of N585 million (Jannamike, 2024). Although both have denied any wrongdoing even as the investigation is still ongoing, it shows the level of systemic decay that propels financial recklessness by public officials elected or appointed to serve vulnerable Nigerians who are battling for daily survival.

The birth of CSDP was in response to the multiplying cases of financial impropriety and the need for a change in approach to rural development in Nigeria. The CSDP, a bottom-top approach to rural development, is supervised by the Community and Social Development Agency (CSDA) across the 36 states of Nigeria. The bottom-up approach prioritizes a community-driven approach, where the felt needs of communities are articulated, planned for, and addressed. Rather than the state guessing what the community's needs are, the

people themselves articulate their needs and devise means of solving them. By this, wastes and corruption are drastically reduced, or even eliminated, through an efficient delivery system and accountability (Ezirim & Okpoechi, 2020). The design of CSDP was for the government and the World Bank to partner together in delivering development in rural Nigeria. The communities were expected to provide counterpart funding while the government, through the World Bank, would provide the rest. However, following the World Bank's withdrawal from the project in 2021, due to the expiration of the initial Country Partnership Strategy with the Nigerian government, the project is now implemented between state governments and their people (Lamai, 2021).

Previous studies on rural development have highlighted the pervasive nature of corruption, extending from the planning to the implementation stages of development programs (Mashreque, 2012; Putri et al., 2023; Zhao, 2021). For instance, Zhao (2021) examined the relationship between corruption, village cadres, and local-state officials in China, showing that although corruption persists, the local anti-corruption framework plays a critical role in constraining corrupt practices. In this way, corruption is gradually disincentivized in rural China.

Similar to Zhao's findings Wu and Christensen (2021) demonstrated that, despite the increasing prevalence of corrupt practices in rural China, accountability is held in high esteem, a characteristic that is relatively scarce in Nigeria. However, it remains unclear how rural corruption persists in certain developing countries, such as Nigeria, despite the presence of anti-corruption frameworks, as seen in China. The use of political accountability to address issues of embezzlement is prevalent in rural China, as most village cadres are Communist Party members and therefore must be held politically accountable if they are corrupt (Ling, 2019). However, the study failed to show the link between corrupt village cadres and government officials.

This raises important issues: can village cadres embezzle funds without the knowledge of state institutions? Who authorizes the release of funds? If accountability frameworks are as effective as claimed, why does corruption at the village level continue to rise in China? These unresolved questions suggest that for corruption to persist in developing contexts, a critical nexus of actors—including local elites, state institutions, and possibly international networks—must sustain corrupt practices.

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of the CSDP in promoting the desired rural development by combating corruption in Edo State, an area that has received little scholarly attention. It seeks to demonstrate how the dreaded corruption and the patterns it has assumed have also infiltrated this experimental bottom-up CSDP. The study employs a qualitative approach to examine the politics and power that orchestrated the primitive accumulation in rural communities of Edo State, Nigeria. Edo State is chosen for convenience. It is also one of the states that implements CSDP in Nigeria. The rest of the study revolves around this tasking objective.

Literature review

Poverty

It is considered that the proper understanding of poverty alleviation programmes or policies should begin with the explanation of poverty. According to Peng et al. (2024), how poverty is defined and measured determines how poverty alleviation policies are implemented. However, as important as conceptualising poverty is to poverty alleviation research, its precise definition is shrouded in controversy. For instance, Peng et al. (2024) emphasized that the poverty controversy lies between two strands of scholars – those who believe it should be conceptualized in relation to resource deprivation and those who believe it should be conceptualized from a capability deprivation perspective.

The resource deprivation approach focuses on specific items that people need to lead a good life in society. Historically, Rowntree (1901) was the foremost poverty researcher who conceptualised poverty from primary and secondary perspectives. Primary poverty refers to the condition of extreme poverty, where people live below the minimum requirements for survival, such as nutrition, housing, health, wages, shelter, and household items (Acosta & Quishpe, 2017). It measures poverty in absolute terms. Secondary poverty refers to those whose income is sufficient for them to live above the poverty line but find themselves living below the poverty line due to their expenditure in other things other than necessities of life, either wasteful or useful, such as alcohol, hard drugs, or gambling (Acosta & Quishpe, 2017). Unlike primary poverty, secondary poverty is measured in relative terms.

The conceptualization of poverty from the resource-deprivation approach appears to be widely accepted among scholars and international development agencies, such as the World Bank. For instance, the World Bank, (2022) views poverty as encompassing low-quality healthcare, low education, and low consumption. The

objective of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to end these forms of poverty by 2030 (Ofure et al., 2024). However, critics such as Mahler et al. (2018) have argued that the concept of poverty should move beyond monetary terms to include social needs, such as the sets of customs and activities in which individuals are expected to share or in which they are expected to participate. It is essential to combine both income and deprivation indices rather than relying solely on income to measure poverty.

On the other hand, proponents and supporters of the capability deprivation approach, such as Peng et al. (2024) and Sen (1992) contend that poverty measurement should focus on the actual opportunities an individual possesses, namely, functioning and capabilities. These scholars argue that functioning and capabilities are more important than prioritizing income and other resources, which, though important, only constitute an element of what generally influences what we do and who we are. Functioning refers to various things that a person may value doing or being, such as being safe, healthy, and able to move around. Capability, on the other hand, refers to the real opportunity or freedom to accomplish those things we value doing (Fragoso, 2024). In the context of this study, poverty is operationally defined as a lack of essential socio-economic resources, including good roads, electricity, health centers, clean and accessible water, and quality education. These varied conceptions of poverty did not intend to drag the concept of poverty into the murky waters of definitional controversy, but rather to highlight the importance of the concept and provide a broad spectrum of measurements that would trigger proper and efficient poverty alleviation policies to address poverty.

Poverty alleviation programmes

As it relates to this study, poverty alleviation programmes are sets of initiatives designed to reduce poverty in rural settings. They are the steps, efforts, designs, policies, and strategies aimed at reducing or eliminating poverty through the provision of access to basic needs and economic opportunities, thereby improving the living standards of people living in poverty (IGI-Global, 2021). Poverty alleviation should start by reducing biases against the rural sector and the informal sector, not necessarily reversing the bias, but ensuring neutrality (Ayoo, 2022). Poverty alleviation programmes or policies are a function of the continuous search for poverty eradication, or at best, a drastic reduction of poverty from human existence. As humans populate the world, thereby increasing the responsibilities and expectations placed on the shoulders of governments, the need for sustainable policies that can guarantee basic human survival and the capacity to function in the environment becomes indispensable.

In the African context, numerous poverty alleviation policies have been created and implemented, with most being recommended neoliberal policies, such as the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). However, the effectiveness of SAP at reducing poverty has been a subject of continuous debate. The programme was believed to have led to unusually high food and transportation prices, job losses, and income shortfalls (Ogebe & Ogah, 2020). Moreover, the weak African institutions and economies, which are largely raw resource-based, coupled with elite corruption and financial mismanagement, as well as ineffective foreign dictates, have shrunk their effectiveness (Ogola, 2025; Zuniga, 2018).

In the Nigerian context, the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) was introduced during General Ibrahim Babangida's military regime to revamp the ailing economy. It aimed to set the state on the path of economic prosperity through several policy measures, including the removal of subsidies, the devaluation of the Naira, a drastic reduction in government employment, the privatization of state-owned enterprises, and the promotion of a free-market economy. Like in all Africa states, it, however, failed to achieve the desired objectives (Ofure et al., 2024). Dishonesty on the part of the leadership, a lack of proper awareness among a large proportion of Nigerians, and weak internal economic policies to sustain the gains from SAP, paralysed the policy from the start. The same fate befell subsequent programs that emerged after SAP, as mentioned earlier in this paper. With the level of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) increasing on a daily basis, estimated to continue rising by 2050 (Ekpeyong, 2024), the need for proactive poverty alleviation policies that will curb this poverty trend becomes increasingly crucial.

Ruralization of corruption

Ruralization of corruption refers to a shift in the corruption template from the usual and popular public spaces, such as the civil service, parastatals, and departments, to rural areas or communities. It can also be referred to as a decentralised, top-bottom form of corruption in which established institutions and appointed officials in collaboration with traditional institutions, community officials or representatives or community-based organizations extend their corruptive tendencies to rural areas through the manipulation of community projects, falsification of contract figures, embezzlement of projects funds and non-completion or complete abandonment

of community projects. In the literature on ruralization and corruption, the elite have been mostly implicated, given that they can influence rural structures and agents through their socio-political and economic influence.

The ubiquity of corruption in Nigeria presents a difficult task of explication and solution. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to understanding corruption due to qualitative differences in how corruption operates across societies (Gong & Yang, 2019). These differences are orchestrated by different capacities and abilities to participate in political and economic life, as well as the strength of institutions to exercise regulatory powers over political and economic forces (Paar-Jakli & Molina, 2024).

In the perspective of Godson-Ibeji et al. (2016), corruption can manifest in various forms in Nigerian rural communities, including bribery, embezzlement, extortion, fraud, and favouritism. While these forms of corruption are not peculiar to Nigeria, their nuanced manifestations in Nigeria often make their understanding elusive. In fact, according to Adam & Fazekas (2021), it makes little sense to expect Nigerian leaders to show political will in fighting corruption when they themselves are the source of state capture and other corruptive activities. As previously noted, previous rural development initiatives in Nigeria were plagued by corruption, which led to the creation of CSDP. However, whether CSDP has successfully achieved this goal is the primary objective of this study.

Empirical literature

Studies on corruption in rural areas during the planning and execution of development projects have been increasing, but they have yet to receive sufficient attention despite the steady rise of corruption globally. For instance, Putri et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of 30 years of village corruption research, drawing on 158 articles from the Web of Science Database. The authors found that research on village corruption has evolved from Africa to China, suggesting a growing interest in rural corruption research. This study, therefore, contributes to the growing body of research on the dynamics of corruption in rural areas by reviewing the existing literature on the discourse.

Zhao (2021) examined the patron-client network that existed between local-state officials and village cadres in nine villages across three provinces in rural China: Zhejiang, Shandong, and Shaanxi. Sixty-two participants, including villagers, village cadres, township officials, and county officials, were interviewed, and the results were analyzed using thematic analysis. Although their tasks have undergone a massive transformation in recent years, village cadres are expected to carry out the directives of state officials in relation to village governance, such as village reconstruction, land acquisition, environmental maintenance, and stability maintenance (Lora-Wainwright et al. 2012; Zhao, 2018).

The authors found that, unlike the common narrative that the income opportunities of village cadres are likely to diminish in highly developed or industrialized villages, village cadres had opportunities to increase their streams of income in both rich and poor villages. Through internal sources (such as the exploitation of rents, enterprises, and natural resources) and external sources (such as the embezzlement of funds transferred from the state to villages for development projects), they increase their streams of income. Furthermore, they found that while the village cadres were reportedly corrupt, their level of compliance with the tasks assigned to them by the state authorities shielded them from scrutiny and prosecution. While this did not suggest any form of relationship between the two agents to commit corruption, it did suggest that once the task assigned to the village cadre was carried out, however small or big, every claim of possible embezzlement by the village cadres would be met with deaf ears.

Another crucial finding made by the authors was that local state authorities allowed corruption by village cadres, as it was a readily available, low-cost, and effective strategy to motivate the village cadres to work. The latter were not paid salaries befitting their work, hence, "unlike official salary that are provided by the state, corruption rents are seized by village cadres themselves and are not siphoned from the state's budget" (Zhao, 2021). However, despite the advantages of corruption, state authorities still utilized the cadre-evaluation system to counteract the excessive abuse of office by village cadres, thereby forcing them out of office.

Zhao's work is relevant to this paper in several ways. It reveals the intricate relationship between state authorities and village institutions in the perpetuation of corruption during rural development. It aligns with the perennial linkage in the Nigerian corruption narrative between state officials and village representatives. However, unlike the use of corruption as a motivating factor, it often serves as a great disservice to the people while serving the interests of the actors. Furthermore, Zhao demonstrates that a checkmating system, such as cadre evaluation, can operate effectively in a developing society, like China, where people are empowered to

remove a village cadre who has compromised the standard excessively through a legal process, such as an election.

This finding suggests that the political environment is crucial to understanding the ramifications and dynamics of corruption in a country like Nigeria. Due to the intersection of interests between state authorities and village institutions, every mechanism aimed at implicating corrupt officials will be highly resisted and compromised by the actors in order to conceal their nefarious activities. Therefore, while Zhao's study is worth commending, it requires a further cross-sectional study to demonstrate that local institutions for combating corruption are allowed to function in certain contexts, such as China, but are deactivated in others, like Nigeria.

In a bid to show the level of corruption in rural China, Wu and Christensen (2021) compared the activities of village and township cadres using interviews and secondary data of over 200,000 cases of corruption mainly from the website of the Chinese Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and Chinese Local Commission for Discipline Inspection between 2016 and 2018. The study found that although pervasive corruption existed among both village and town cadres, it was more prevalent among village cadres. Two forms of corruption existed in rural China: individual and group corruption, with individual corruption more prevalent than group corruption. The most prevalent form of corruption (between 75 and 80% of corruption data) was embezzlement of poverty funds, while the most important form of accountability was political accountability. More intriguingly, the study revealed that self-interest was the primary motivating factor for fund embezzlement among the cadres, which was framed within the context of 'rational choice.' Rational choice enabled the cadres to choose the form of corruption in which to indulge, with limited costs but greater benefits.

In Bangladesh, Mashreque (2012) examined the paradox of rural development in relation to poverty alleviation and triangular policy manipulation. The study utilized secondary data and personal experiences to demonstrate how 'policy actors who constitute "policy triangles" negate desirable transformation'. Triangular manipulation refers to the manipulation by a dominant interest group comprising governing elites, fortune-seeking political entrepreneurs, and privileged business communities. Given the symbiotic relationship that exists between the ruling regimes (governing elites) and local leadership, the latter becomes a "lucrative trade without investment drawing most patronage resources from the ruling regimes". Also, as a result of the ubiquity of patronage, there is an ostensible factional tussle to "capture those resources which provide accessibility to development inputs flowing into the locality from different strategic points of the "centre power axis". The resultant effect of "fuzzy governance" that births non-participation of common ruralities is widespread as various bureaucratic bottlenecks tend to favour the patron-clientelist framework.

Mashreque's finding is particularly relevant to this paper. It deeply implicates Nigeria's rural development paradox, which prioritizes primitive accumulation over rural development. The diversion of rural inputs for development in Bangladesh highlights the elite's conspiracy to undermine poverty alleviation initiatives, as well as the symbiotic patronage among the various actors involved. However, Mashreque's use of secondary materials as a basis for analysis could portend bias. As earlier indicated, studies on corruption can be comprehensively analyzed using field methods that capture the intricate dimensions of corruption. This study, therefore, will benefit the research community by providing data on the dimensions of corruption in rural development in Edo State. While Mashreque's work can be of great importance in enriching the analytical framework of this paper, it needs to complement its findings with primary field data for enhanced generalization.

In Africa, Beekman et al. (2013) investigated the impact of community corruption on investment across 44 communities in three districts of Liberia. Data were collected using both experimental and survey methods. Specifically, the authors examined how corruption affected the economic activities of households in rural Liberia, where corrupt community leaders diverted resources intended for community development. They measured the amount of inputs before and after storage. The study found that the actions of the community leaders reduced income-generating activities and decreased the quantity of rice planted by 50%.

In a follow-up study in 2014, Beekman et al. (2014) found that the diversion of inputs by corrupt community leaders undermined the motivation for voluntary contributions to public goods, which in turn had the potential to discourage private investment in these communities. This finding is significant, given that private investment, both local and international, is a key driver of rural development in Africa (German et al. 2016). States are often financially constrained and heavily reliant on private organizations for support.

The authors' methodological approach, which combines experimental and survey methods, is commendable. However, future studies on corruption in Africa should incorporate robust interview processes that elicit deeper insights into the dynamics and scope of corruption. The use of interviews is a methodological strength that

distinguishes this study from previous research on rural corruption. Additionally, more attention should be given to examining how the blatant misuse of resources affects all areas of rural development, not just investment, as effectively highlighted by Beekman and colleagues.

Theoretical underpinning: Elite theory

Elite theory is credited to the nineteenth-century classical works of Pareto (1848-1923), Mosca (1858-1941) and Michels (1876-1936). Since the turn of the twentieth century, elite theory has gained ascendancy in the mainstream social sciences. In contemporary times, the word 'elite' has assumed a more varied meaning, such as an occupational or functional group in society or an exploitative group or leadership (Dunleavy & O'Leary, 1987). This latter conception aligns with Harold Lasswell's (1936) famous definition of politics as 'who gets what, when, how.' To Lasswell, the study of politics is the study of influence and the individuals who wield it. The influential are those who obtain the most, popularly known as the elite, while the rest are the masses (Carpenter, 1936). Consequently, elite theory emerged to seek a scientific explanation for the economic, intellectual, political, power, and cultural divide between the few who possess resources and the majority who do not (Mariotti, 2020). This search pervaded the works of the classical elite theorists earlier mentioned.

Mosca (1939) argued that there are two classes of people in society – the class that rules and the class that is ruled. The ruling class, usually in a minority, outwits the ruled, who are usually in the majority, due to their moral, informational, intellectual, and material superiority. Pareto (1935) noted that the elite are those with the highest standards of excellence in their various chosen fields, such as business, trade, and politics. He acknowledged that not all of them can be found in the political sphere; hence, there can be a governing elite, those who rule directly or indirectly, and a non-governing elite, those who do not directly or indirectly participate in politics. However, the base of the governing elite can be challenged or displaced by another elite, suggesting an eternal competition for relevance and power, as well as circulation among them (Pareto, 1966).

In practice, these foremost elite theorists envisioned a stable and efficient political governance run and managed by the governing elite, as they believed they possessed a monopoly on excellence and nobility. However, as they later realised, the rule by the governing elite does not always turn out to be the best given their penchant for power and influence (Dunleavy & O'Leary, 1987). As a result, the emerging corruption literature has become riddled with the elite's primitive accumulation, subversion of democratic rules, and existing structures designed for accountability and transparency (Alafuro & Lovinah, 2017; Etzioni-Halevy, 1989; Ojukwu & Shopeju, 2018; Popa, 2015).

As stated earlier, the prevalence of corruption in Nigeria presents a challenging problem, both in terms of explanation and solution. The elite approach to corruption research in Africa has a distinct historical context. Some scholars argue that a comprehensive study of elites and corruption cannot be considered complete without reference to colonialism (Ali et al., 2020; 2021). Local chiefs, as well as educated elites, collaborated with colonial authorities to perpetuate subjugation, domination, and imperialism. According to Ali et al. (2020), these practices were possible because local chiefs controlled the indigenous population, thereby rendering the formal legal systems introduced by the colonialists almost irrelevant.

At the rural level in Nigeria, elite theory helps to explain the political intrigues that shape rural development initiatives. It highlights the complex interplay of power and influence, as well as the intricate relationship between rural elites—who are perceived as being closer to the people—and national or subnational elites, who initiate and implement such initiatives (Ojukwu & Shopeju, 2018). This relationship, according to some scholars, has contributed to the persistent underdevelopment of rural Nigeria (Alafuro & lovinah, 2017).

Critics of elite theory argue that it is overly voluntaristic in its analysis of elite power and that it appears to undermine modern democracy and pluralism by downplaying the importance of collective action (Codato & Perissinotto, 2011; Sharma, 1976), Nevertheless, the theory continues to resonate with social researchers, particularly as the growing wave of corruption implicates both governing and non-governing elites in developing countries such as Nigeria.

Methods

The study took a constructivist approach to probe people's experiences and perspectives on the patterns and politics of corruption in rural communities in Nigeria. This study utilised a qualitative descriptive design because this type of design is particularly suitable for studies that involve in-depth interviews. This form of design allows researchers to describe phenomena in-depth and offer a comprehensive understanding of the

issue being studied. It also provides flexibility in analyzing narrative data, enabling the researcher to identify emerging patterns and themes.

Data was collected through an in-depth interview and observation. The interview method helped the authors identify certain inherent behavioral abnormalities and the power dynamics that hindered project performance and execution in the areas investigated, as well as gather people's perceptions about them. The observation method was employed to assess the quality of the executed projects and determine whether they aligned with the quoted figures and the testimonies provided by the respondents. The observation method has proven to be one of the oldest research methods in the social sciences. It allows the researcher to observe a phenomenon while maintaining a high standard of objectivity (Kumar & Sharma, 2023).

The study employed a stratified random sampling technique to divide Edo State into three senatorial districts: Edo North, Edo South, and Edo Central. From each of these senatorial districts, two Local Government Areas (LGAs) were selected based on convenience. In Edo North, Akoko-Edo and Etsako-West were selected. In Edo Central, Esan Central, and Esan West were selected. In Edo South, Ovia North East, and Ikpoba-Okha were selected. From each of the selected LGAs, a certain number of communities were selected (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. The selected senatorial districts, local government areas and communities

Senatorial Districts	LGAs	Communities
Edo North	Akoko-Edo	Ekpedo, Ekpe, Uneme-Osu and Makeke
	Etsako-West	Ikholo, Iyamoh, Afashio and Ikabigbo
Edo Central	Esan Central	Eguare-Ewu, Agua, Ugbegun and Idunwele.
	Esan West	Eguare, Ogwa, Ugiogba and Emaudo.
Edo South	Ovia North East	Uhiere, Utekon, Okhunmwun and Ebvoneka
	Ikpoba-Okha	Evboriaria, Erediauwa, Uteh and Ohovbe

Source: Field Survey (2023)

A snowball sampling technique was also utilized, as not everyone in the communities could be sufficiently aware of the executed projects. Therefore, the snowball sampling technique was used to identify participants with in-depth knowledge about the executed projects. A total of 109 respondents were interviewed: 8 CSDA officials and 101 respondents, comprising community leaders, project executives, women leaders, youth leaders, government staff, and community members. The study was conducted between June 21 and November 30, 2023, as part of the authors' doctoral requirements. Due to the proximity of the communities, it was easier to reach the respondents within the period. The interview questions were semi-structured to allow for flexibility, and the responses were tape-recorded with the participants' consent. The participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the interview process at any stage.

Questions varied according to the set of respondents interviewed. To the CSDA officials, questions were posed regarding their involvement in the initiation of projects, receipt and disbursement of funds, and execution of projects. For instance, they were asked how projects were selected, how much was earmarked and dispensed, the person or people in charge of the disbursement, and how the account was managed and closed. To the communities, questions were posed regarding how the executed projects were initiated, assessed, and funded. Questions relating to the setting up of project committees and how they utilised the funds made available to them were also asked. All these questions were asked to unravel the politics of patronage, embezzlement, and diversion that played out throughout the planning and execution of the projects.

The authors acknowledge the shortcomings of the chosen research methods, particularly the interview method, as well as the choice of convenience and snowball sampling approaches. For one, the methods and sampling approaches may raise questions about whether they accurately represent the opinions of the entire population of Edo State. Instead, the choice of research methods was informed by the nature of the research, as it would be difficult to conduct a study on corruption using randomly selected communities or participants, particularly one that requires an in-depth study. The authors required an approach that would allow for observation of facial expressions, body language, tones, and body stability of participants, as well as ensure proper checks on the executed projects for comparison with quoted figures. Therefore, findings from these selected communities provided valuable insights into the actors involved and patterns of corruption in rural development projects in Edo State communities, as well as the power politics that fueled various forms of corruption.

Results and discussion

Poverty alleviation programme and rural corruption in Nigeria

Patterns of corruption

In the investigated communities, corruption manifested in two broad forms: power politics and fund mismanagement. These two are not mutually exclusive, as there is an element of power politics in fund mismanagement and vice versa.

Power politics-corruption nexus

The world-renowned Nigerian poet, Achebe (1984), in his famous diagnosis of Nigeria's problem, remarked, "corruption goes with power; and whatever the average man may have, it is not power. Therefore to hold any useful discussion of corruption we must first locate it where it properly belongs – in the ranks of the powerful." This quote suggests that corruption is a function of the elite's contestation over power and sometimes, prestige. Once the interests of the elites do not align, the contest may become brutal and virulent.

In rural settings, power politics is almost unavoidable, given the disparate interests over who controls and oversees funds for project execution. This could lead to alliance and re-alliance depending on the changing nature of interests and power dynamics. At times, the power contestation can be vertical, that is, between a government agency or official representing the interest of the government or donor agency and the community representatives, or horizontal, that is, between and among community representatives themselves, such as community leaders, youth and women leaders or project committee members, depending on their interests. When this happens, the government or donor agency representative can form an alliance with certain interests in the community when their interests intersect, while the remaining individuals at the community level can form their own alliances. The implications for this power dynamics can be enormous, including, but not limited to, project abandonment, substandard project, and/or financial embezzlement.

In the context of CSDP, project initiation often takes a complex political route. This is because a needy community will have to apply to the state government, stating the nature of need and willingness to provide a counterpart fund. Given that there is potential for many communities to apply simultaneously amid scarce financial resources, the approval of the interest form often takes on a political undertone. That way, any community with a representative at the national or state level is likely to get approval based on political influence. This phenomenon was widely observed by the authors in most communities, as counterpart funds were single-handedly paid by political officeholders to facilitate the approval process. However, a particular astounding experience was the discovery made in the Ekpe community.

The community had four key interventions, namely two water schemes, town halls, lock-up stores, and offices, whereas the neighbouring communities had barely any. The influence of some prominent political personalities, such as a former local government chairman, influenced the siting of the projects in the community. To ensure that some of the projects were not sited outside the community as required, the Ekpe community was politically, but hastily and arbitrarily, divided into 'Upper Ekpe' and 'Lower Ekpe', and the water schemes were sited in each of these divisions. Apparently, as observed, the distance between the two water schemes is less than 500 meters. As a result, while the Ekpe community was pleased, its neighbors felt cheated.

Similar developments were also observed in other communities, where some elites attempted to hijack or had already hijacked the intervention process. The case of the Ikhollo community was quite interesting. As found, a prominent personality from the community was alleged to have used his personal account for the disbursement of the project fund, rather than a community account opened for that purpose. To avoid scrutiny,

he sidelined the community chairman and youth leader, opting instead for solitary engagement with the CSDA, an act that provoked some community members. As a result, the approved projects, such as lock-up stores and town hall, were built but not up to the standard expected. Moreover, the remaining part of the fund disappeared after the projects were completed. His actions factionalized the community into two camps: those supporting the politician and those supporting the community leader. When asked his opinion, the chairman of Ikhollo Community, who doubles as the youth leader of the community, angrily recanted:

> *"You see, the man [referring to the politician who was alleged to have hijacked the town hall and locked up stalls and projects] was acting very well at the beginning. But when money came, he started acting alone. In a project like this, I should have been consulted, but he didn't. Instead, he kept deceiving us that the government (referring to CSDA) could not handle any issues we raised during the execution of the projects. He took advantage of his position as a politician to provide his personal account against the rules of the game, from where he was making funds available piecemeal. After the projects, the remaining funds disappeared." (Participant 34)*

Furthermore, when asked if he thought that the politician colluded with CSDA officials to perpetrate such an act, he said assuredly:

> *"Of course, yes. If they (CSDA officials) didn't, how could it be possible for the money to be paid into his private account after the community had opened an account as instructed by CSDA itself? My brothers (referring to the authors), it is a Nigerian thing, and it must be condemned." (Participant 34)*

These realities not only reveal the extent of corruption in Nigeria but also highlight the degree of state-society complicity in corruption. Corruption must be understood in the context of everyday instances of patronage as they occur in networks of kin, community, and interpersonal association (Noak, 2024). This suggests that, although the focus of corruption has always been on the state, it is also important to focus on ordinary people who are not typically considered powerful or elite. The social reproduction of corruption also implicates the 'average Nigerians' who perpetuate the system of patron-clientelism (Okojie & Ebonine, 2024). While society can be complicit in corruption, the patron-client relationship is deeply rooted in inequality and power differences. The retention of loyalty and obedience from the client is a function of the continued distributive capacity of the patron (Higashijima, 2022). For the patron-client relations to 'retain its homeostatic qualities', the resource distribution must remain satisfying to both parties.

In some communities, the selection of project committee members is based on who has access to the government. As found, some of the committee members were retired soldiers, retired and serving top civil servants, and seasoned politicians. A network of patron-client relations became easy to build due to the statuses of these individuals. They were able to attract supervisory roles from the government throughout the project's cycle. Given their connection to the centre, some of them boasted that nothing would happen to them after the community members questioned their roles in the entire project cycle. In one instance, a woman from Ikabigbo community angrily said when asked how the project committee members acted during the process of construction of lock-up stalls:

> *"These stalls were supposed to have iron doors (as planned) so that users could secure their goods inside after each market day. We have complained to the project committee chairman, but he questioned our knowledge about project execution and threatened to deal decisively with anyone who disturbs him again. When we threatened to report him to the appropriate authorities, he asked us to go ahead simply because he knew nothing would happen to him. He is a Nigerian politician." (Participant 44)*

In contrast to the dysfunctional dimension of the state-society corruption linkage driven by power politics, functionalist theorists argue that corruption can sometimes produce unexpected benefits (Munger, 2018; 2019; Tullock, 1996). According to Munger (2018), when there are visible legal obstacles to cooperation, it may become desirable to employ bribery tactics that bypass the law and enhance efficiency. This is what Munger (2018) refers to as 'functional' corruption.

However, functionalist theorists have failed to address the long-term effects of corruption, despite its potential short-term benefits. In the long run, corruption, in whatever form it takes, can lead to the degeneration of social norms and values (Bicchieri, 2017). In rural communities, where traditional values are deeply cherished, normalizing corruption in the name of enhancing efficiency may become an impediment to community cohesion and development. As evidenced in the Ikhollo community, allegations of corruption had already polarized the community, potentially leading to a breakdown of unity.

Mismanagement of funds

Apart from power politics, the authors also discovered high-level mismanagement of project funds. As earlier stated, the relations between the state and community actors often give rise to policy failure or discontinuity. This was also observed in some communities where previous interventions had been visibly abandoned. However, fund mismanagement may not necessarily involve collaboration between the state and society. It could be perpetrated by certain appointed individuals without the knowledge of the state or even the community members. The only time a trace of the perpetration can be discovered is when questions are raised due to the sub-standard nature, partial or complete abandonment of projects.

In the communities, the total cost of the projects, particularly those executed between 2015 and onwards, was clearly visible on the CSDP signposts strategically positioned near the executed projects. Apparently, this was meant to promote accountability. However, the findings revealed a glaring disconnect between the signposted figures and the value of the projects when compared to their standard. In the Uhiere community, for instance, the authors observed that a maternity project, although attractive when viewed from the outside, was recognizably in poor condition when its interior was assessed. The roof was open, allowing rain to enter the maternity rooms, which were already lacking in essential items such as good bedding, electricity, and other necessities required for standard maternity care. When the matron in charge of the maternity ward was interviewed, she noted that the maternity ward was not a new one, as the project executors would have us believe. It was an existing maternity ward that was functional (though it needed some equipment, as the previous one had become too old) compared to the present 'refurbished' one. The community was led to believe that the project, costing N6 million, was for a new maternity facility. As a result of its bad shape, pregnant women have resorted to alternative ways of baby delivery, ostensibly avoiding maternity.

Furthermore, a shocking revelation responsible for the apparent mismanagement and embezzlement of funds is the 'mentality that the project is a government thing and therefore cannot be accounted for,' as the matron summarized it. This appears to be common in Nigeria and explains the incessant misappropriation of public funds, plundering, and wilful destruction of government property and facilities during any public demonstration (Shuaib, 2024). The widely cited work of Peter Ekeh (1975), "The Two Publics," clearly summarizes this form of mental state. To Ekeh, the experiences of colonialism produced two publics, the civic public (comprising the police, armed forces, public service, etc) and the primordial public (comprising rural communities). Africa relates to the civic public in amoral terms, while it relates to the primordial public in moral terms (Ekeh, 1975).

This ambivalent state of mind has the potential to lead to the failure of executed projects, which can also be seen as corruption. Project sustainability is defined as the process and capacity to initiate a project, execute and manage it for future use. It is integrated into project management. Basically, project sustainability encompasses economy, environment, and society (Purvis et al., 2019). Projects that are not sustained often suffer decay and extinction. The task of sustaining projects, particularly rural projects, is not only for the executing body to shoulder, but also for the benefiting communities. However, when mismanagement of funds is observed, it can disincentivize maintenance oversight over the executed projects. This was also apparent in some of the communities investigated.

Conclusion

This paper examines the complex infestation of corruption by those who are expected to be champions of rural development. The complexity of corruption manifests in the dyadic relationship between the 'established' corrupt elites and the people – a syndrome deliberately referred to as 'ruralization of corruption' in this study. Ideally, poverty alleviation programmes are meant to address complex and multidimensional poverty among rural dwellers. In the Nigerian context, they are often created not only to address the enervating rural poverty, but also to sustain urban lives, given that much of the agricultural goods for urban consumption come from rural areas. It is therefore logical to argue that corruption, which has plagued the Nigerian system since independence, exists and persists in almost every implementation phase of poverty alleviation programmes.

The study employed the elite theory to demonstrate that the dominant discourse about corruption in Nigeria has implicated the elites, who, by virtue of their standing in society, should be seen as embodiments of positive change and social transformation for the benefit of all. They would rather engage in corrupt practices by forming alliances with corrupt individuals who perpetuate their interests through their various positions, in return for rewards. As such, the use of bribery, nepotism, rewards, and promises for power and protection is not only the form of corruption capsule utilized to keep the patron-client or master-servant relationship

together, but also constitutes elites' grand strategies to perpetuate themselves in the political, social, economic, and geographical spheres of society. The strategies reinforce what Ashforth and Anand (2003) referred to as 'normalization of corruption', a syndrome that emboldens corruption perpetration in every area – and in the case of this study, occurs in the form of power politics and brazen fund mismanagement in rural development.

This paper, therefore, demonstrates that the corruption enigma that frustrated the achievement of previous poverty alleviation policies before the creation of the extant bottom-top CSDP approach in Nigeria can also constitute a hindrance to the achievement of the latter, particularly as it has assumed a nuanced, elite-society romantic dimension.

Recommendations

To address this enigma, the study recommends the following:

First, the use of whistleblowers at the community level should be encouraged. Whistleblowing mechanisms are not new in Nigeria, but they have not been widely explored or legally supported. To this end, whistleblowers are often jittery about divulging sensitive information that can help address corruptive tendencies in the state. The participants who divulged elite financial corruption in various communities would have easily approached investigative authorities, such as the police, which would have ensured the timely prosecution of culprits, but for the police's complicity in corruption. For the whistle-blowing mechanism to be effective in Nigeria, there should be a legal enactment that protects the rights of whistle-blowers. This would shield them from unnecessary harassment and threats from those exposed to corruption.

Second, tackling corruption in this contemporary time has become technological. The idea of paperwork that is still common in Nigeria should be completely discouraged. Social media and technological devices have made it easier for corruption reporting to be facilitated without requiring an in-person appearance. Therefore, communities should be sensitized to the need to lodge their information on an appropriate online portal provided for this purpose. This would guarantee timely reporting and response needed to tackle rural corruption effectively.

Third, in addition to technology, the involvement of critical advocacy groups, such as civil society groups, Transparency International, and the media, is highly recommended for tackling rural corruption. The government and communities should ensure that these groups are involved in any rural project initiated. This would, to a large extent, dissuade individuals from mismanaging public funds.

Last, there should be a renewed and continued advocacy against corruption in Nigeria. Moreover, critical stakeholders such as the police and the judiciary should be proactive in investigating corruption cases and courageous enough to convict any person found guilty. Public funds are meant to improve people's lives; hence, whoever misappropriates them must be held accountable.

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Statement of originality and plagiarism-free

We inform that this article is original article and free of plagiarism

Competing interests

The author(s) declare no conflicts of interest related to this research, authorship, or publication.

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