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POLICY ISSUES AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NIGERIAN AND BRITISH EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This study examined policy issues and sustainable rural development through a comparative analysis of the Nigerian and British experiences between 2014 and 2024. Specifically, the study sought to identify the major policy issues affecting rural development; examine how institutional arrangements and policy delivery mechanisms shaped rural development outcomes; evaluate the role of infrastructure investments in promoting rural economic development; and compare institutional capacities and stakeholder engagement models in Nigeria and the United Kingdom. The study was anchored on Douglas North's (1990) New Institutionalism Theory, which emphasizes the role of institutions in shaping development outcomes. The population of this study comprises rural dwellers in selected communities within Lancashire County, United Kingdom, and Eastern Nigeria given at 9,666,700. A sample size of 400 respondents were selected using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula. This study relied on secondary data obtained from government publications, policy documents, reports of international organizations, journal articles, books, and other relevant scholarly sources. Data were analyzed using qualitative comparative analysis supported by descriptive statistics and inferential analysis for One-Sample Z-Test at a 5% significance level, with the aid of SPSS version 26. Hypotheses tested at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that sustainable rural development is significantly

influenced by effective policy implementation, strong institutional frameworks, adequate infrastructure investments, and inclusive financing and stakeholder engagement mechanisms. The study concluded that achieving sustainable rural development depends not only on the formulation of sound policies but also on effective institutions, efficient policy implementation, sustained infrastructure investment, adequate financing, and inclusive stakeholder participation. It recommended that Nigeria should strengthen policy consistency, improve institutional capacity and policy delivery mechanisms, increase investment in critical rural infrastructure, and promote participatory governance by adopting relevant institutional and stakeholder engagement practices that reflect its socio-economic realities.

Introduction

Rural areas are central to national development because they provide food, raw materials, employment and livelihoods. In Nigeria, agriculture remains a major contributor to employment and GDP, prompting policies such as the National Agricultural Technology and Innovation Policy (NATIP) 2022–2027, which seeks to improve agricultural productivity, value-chain development, technology adoption and private-sector participation (IFPRI, 2022). Ojiako, Nwafor, & Oju (2023) posit that successive governments in Nigeria have articulated a number of policies aimed at achieving sustainable economic development. However, weak institutional capacity, poor coordination among government tiers and inadequate financing continue to limit implementation (FAO, 2022).

Infrastructure, finance and market access remain major determinants of sustainable rural development. Although the World Bank-supported Nigeria Electrification Project (NEP) has expanded rural electricity through mini-grids and home systems, affordability, maintenance and cost-recovery challenges persist (World Bank, 2024a). Similarly, the Rural Access and Agricultural Marketing Project–Scale Up (RAAMP-SU) seeks to improve rural roads and institutional capacity, but funding and governance constraints may affect sustainability (World Bank, 2024b). Rural producers also face limited credit, poor transportation, inadequate storage and processing facilities, post-harvest losses and weak bargaining power (Chinweuba, 2024). Gender disparities further restrict women's access to institutional finance and markets (Ezeaku & Nwankwo, 2025).

In the United Kingdom, rural development has been shaped by rural proofing,

decentralization and place-based policies (OECD, 2024). Programmes such as the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) 2014–2020 supported enterprise diversification, environmental management and local development (DEFRA, 2020), while the Levelling Up agenda seeks to reduce regional inequalities. Nevertheless, rural communities continue to experience challenges involving declining public services, limited broadband access, ageing populations and housing affordability (English Rural, 2024). Thus, both countries face rural development challenges, although Nigeria's major constraints relate to infrastructure, financing, institutional weakness and policy coordination, while the UK faces spatial inequality, housing pressures and service accessibility.

Sustainable rural development therefore depends on adequate infrastructure and basic services, competitive value chains and markets, and effective institutions and financing mechanisms. Comparative analysis of Nigeria and the UK can provide useful lessons on policy design, financing and institutional arrangements for improving rural development outcomes. Accordingly, this study examines policy issues and sustainable rural development in both countries between 2014 and 2024, with emphasis on identifying policy lessons applicable to Nigeria.

Despite substantial policy efforts and investments between 2014 and 2024, sustainable rural development outcomes remain uneven in Nigeria and the United Kingdom. In Nigeria, persistent rural poverty, inadequate infrastructure, weak institutions and limited access to finance have constrained the effectiveness of development initiatives (AfDB, 2023). According to Ojiako, Nwafor, & Oju (2023), there seem to be the absence of 'trickle-down' effects of such robust economic policies in the everyday life of the Nigerian citizens. NATIP and RAAMP-SU have established important development objectives, but fragmented implementation, inadequate funding and weak intergovernmental coordination remain significant obstacles.

Poor rural roads increase transportation costs, restrict market access and contribute to post-harvest losses, while rural electrification continues to face problems of affordability, reliability and maintenance (World Bank, 2024a, 2024b). Financial exclusion, weak storage facilities and poor market integration also limit the profitability of rural producers (Chinweuba, 2024), with women experiencing additional disadvantages in accessing finance

and markets (Ezeaku & Nwankwo, 2025). Climate change, insecurity, farmer–herder conflicts, banditry and communal violence further disrupt agricultural production, increase displacement and weaken rural resilience (Onyekachi, 2025; UNDP, 2022).

Although the UK has stronger institutional structures, rural areas still experience disparities in public services, broadband connectivity and housing affordability (OECD, 2024). Rural England also faces declining social housing and reduced access to health and transport services (English Rural, 2024). These challenges demonstrate that sustainable rural development requires continuous policy adaptation even in developed economies.

The persistence of these challenges indicates a gap between rural development policy and actual outcomes. While Nigeria is constrained mainly by institutional weakness, inadequate financing, poor infrastructure and policy coordination, the UK faces challenges of service equity, housing affordability and spatial inequality. This study therefore comparatively examines these policy issues between 2014 and 2024 to identify lessons for strengthening institutions, improving inclusivity and promoting sustainable rural development in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to analyze various policy issues and the implications for the sustainable rural development of Nigeria and the United Kingdom within the period under review, while the specific goals include to:

1. identify major policy issues affecting rural development in Nigeria and the UK during 2014–2024.

2. find out how institutional arrangements and policy delivery mechanisms shaped rural development outcomes in both countries within the period under review.

3. evaluate the role of infrastructure investments in shaping rural economic outcomes in Nigeria and the UK.

4. compare institutional capacities and stakeholder engagement models between the two countries.

Review of Related Literature

Conceptual Review

Policy

Policy is by no means a new concept in the lexicon of management and social sciences, yet, it has continually lacked a generally acceptable definition, owing to the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of scholars.

According to Howlett, Ramesh & Wu, (2019), it is increasingly viewed not just as a set of formal governmental decisions but as an embedded process of governance that influences outcomes through networks, power relations and institutional logics. In the context of rural areas, policy must be understood both as an instrument of state action, and as a framing mechanism that shapes how rural development is conceived and governed (OECD, 2021). The shift from "top-down" policy design towards more networked, multi-actor governance reflects the complex spatial and sectoral character of rural development (Bache & Flinders, 2018; World Bank, 2020). Indeed, consistent with this view, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that around two-thirds of rural development outcomes across its member states are influenced by coordination among governmental, private sector and civil society actors (OECD, 2022).

Development

The concept of development has evolved from narrow growth paradigms to broader notions of capabilities, resilience and sustainability. Traditional approaches, epitomised by the modernisation paradigm, emphasize economic growth, industrialisation and the transition from agrarian to urban societies (Rostow, 1960). However, since the turn of the millennium, development theory has shifted towards inclusive growth, human development, and resilience-based perspectives (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023). The shift reflects recognition that GDP growth alone does not guarantee improved welfare, particularly in rural settings where structural barriers poor infrastructure, market failure, geographic isolation, constrain opportunities (Ibrahim et al., 2021).

Rural Development

Rural development refers to a multidimensional process aimed at improving the economic, social, environmental, and institutional conditions of rural communities. Traditionally, rural development was associated with agricultural productivity and modernization; however, contemporary approaches view it as a broader transformation process involving livelihoods, infrastructure, human capital, technology, and governance (Ellis, 2021).

The modern understanding of rural development emphasizes that rural communities require more than agricultural support. Access to roads, electricity,

healthcare, education, financial services, and digital technology significantly influences rural wellbeing and economic opportunities (World Bank, 2023). Rural development therefore involves improving productive capacity while reducing inequalities between rural and urban areas.

Sustainable Rural Development

Sustainable rural development (SRD) synthesizes the sustainability agenda with the spatial specificity of rural economies and communities. A widely cited working definition posits that SRD is "the process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being in rural areas, in a way that does not undermine the ecological and social systems on which future generations depend" (Phillips & Pittman, 2020). From an analytical perspective, SRD demands attention to three core dimensions: economic viability (livelihoods, productivity), social equity (access to services, institutions, voice) and ecological integrity (resource base, environmental resilience) (Knickel et al., 2019; FAO, 2021).

Sustainable rural development is broadly understood in the literature as a multidimensional process in which economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability are simultaneously pursued in rural areas (OECD, 2020; FAO, 2019). This concept also emphasizes long-term resilience to shocks (climatic, economic and social) and equitable distribution of benefits across different groups. Sustainable rural development is widely framed as the simultaneous pursuit of economic viability, social inclusion, and environmental stewardship in rural places.

Role of Infrastructure Investments in shaping Rural Economic Outcomes in Nigeria and Britain from 2014–2024

Infrastructure underpins rural transformation by enabling mobility, production, connectivity and access to services. Its distribution, quality and governance strongly influence economic productivity and livelihood outcomes. Nigeria and England again differ sharply in their infrastructural realities, investment patterns and resulting development constraints in the following areas:

a) Transport and Rural Mobility

Nigeria faces major deficits in rural transport infrastructure. Many rural roads are unpaved, poorly maintained or impassable in rainy seasons, increasing post-harvest losses, limiting market access and raising transaction costs. Weak transport networks hinder agricultural value chains, reduce mobility and discourage investment (FAO, 2023).

Conversely, England has an extensive rural transport network, but faces challenges related to service withdrawal, declining bus routes and rising transport costs in remote areas. In England, the issue is maintaining accessibility and service provision, rather than building basic infrastructure.

b) Electrification and Clean Energy Access

Electricity access remains a major barrier in Nigeria, where rural electrification rates remain far lower than urban access levels, constraining enterprises, storage, irrigation and digital inclusion. Unreliable power increases production costs and limits diversification into off-farm activities. England, however, has universal electrification, and current policy debates focus on decarbonization and energy efficiency, not access. Thus, while Nigeria struggles with electrification as a development foundation, England treats energy policy as a sustainability and transition issue.

c) Broadband and Digital Connectivity

In Nigeria, broadband gaps significantly impede innovation, information access and rural competitiveness. Limited connectivity constrains agricultural extension, e-commerce and rural education (World Bank, 2022). England has much broader broadband coverage, but rural areas still lag behind urban centres, which affects competitiveness and service delivery (Ofcom, 2023). Thus, both countries face digital divides, though with vastly different depth and implications.

d) Agricultural and Market Infrastructure

Nigeria continues to lack essential infrastructure such as storage facilities, irrigation, mechanization hubs and agro-processing centres. These gaps depress productivity and limit value addition (FAO, 2023). England, operating from a higher baseline, focuses more on modernisation, sustainability and market efficiency rather than basic access. The result is that Nigeria's infrastructure deficit reinforces subsistence-level rural economies, while England's infrastructure supports diversified and competitive rural markets.

Comparison of Institutional Capacities and Stakeholder Engagement Models between Nigeria and Britain from 2014–2024

Institutional capacity refers to the ability of organisations such as governmental agencies, local authorities, NGOs, and community organisations, to deliver rural development policies, manage resources, coordinate stakeholders and sustain outcomes. In both the United Kingdom (UK) and Nigeria, institutional structures for rural development

evolved significantly between 2014 and 2024, but with major divergences in stakeholder engagement models, resource mobilisation, decentralization, and accountability mechanisms.

In Britain, rural development is governed through a multi-level institutional architecture combining national ministries (e.g., the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs – DEFRA), devolved administrations, local authorities and rural action partnerships. This structure emphasizes stakeholder engagement through formal local forums, community-led local development (CLLD) programmes, rural proofing and public consultation. The emphasis from 2014 onwards has been on greater local empowerment and digital inclusion, with institutions increasingly facilitating partnerships between private, public and community sectors. Institutional capacity is supported by stable funding, rigorous monitoring frameworks and strong governance structures. Stakeholder engagement models are anchored in formal processes of consultation, co-management and grant-based partnerships, with clear roles for local authorities, community groups and private sector actors.

By contrast, Nigeria's institutional capacity during 2014–2024 has been hampered by weaker coordination, overlapping mandates, limited local government capacity, and greater reliance on external donor funding. Stakeholder engagement is less formalised and more project-based, often driven by donor-funded interventions rather than embedded institutional processes. For example, the stakeholder engagement plan for the Nigeria Sustainable Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project clarifies that stakeholder groups include implementing agencies, project-affected parties and interested parties, and emphasizes openness, disclosure and grievance mechanisms. However, capacity constraints at state and local levels, weak financial flows, and limited mechanisms for community ownership hinder sustained engagement.

Comparatively, Britain's model exhibits higher institutional capacity in terms of budget predictability, staff skills, data-driven decision-making and stakeholder governance. In Nigeria, the institutional model is more fragmented and reactive. For example, the UK–Nigeria development partnership summary highlights the UK government's efforts to invest in Nigerian institutional capacity and Nigerian institutional reform under the bilateral development partnership.

Crucially, stakeholder engagement in Britain tends to follow systematic local consultation and empowerment models, whereas in Nigeria it remains loosely structured, with insufficient continuity of engagement and limited community ownership.

Policy Issues and the Challenge of Sustainable Rural Development in Nigeria and Britain

Despite progress, both Nigeria and Britain face significant policy issues and challenges in achieving sustainable rural development. In Britain, key challenges include: rural connectivity gaps (especially in remote areas), service withdrawal (education, health, transport) in low-density zones, ageing rural populations reducing labour supply, and rising cost of living in remote communities. These issues are compounded by institutional budget constraints and policy fragmentation across national, devolved and local levels. Consequently, rural households in Britain may face hidden deprivation despite low official poverty rates (as recent studies show). The challenge for policy is shifting from "rural vs urban" parity to "rural-specific vulnerabilities".

In Nigeria, challenges are more profound: weak local-government capacity, insufficient infrastructure, donor dependence, corruption, policy reversals, land-tenure insecurity, climate-risk exposure, and weak stakeholder engagement. Nnaji, Ojiako, Ukeje, & Nwangbo (2022) identified factors impeding the successful execution of government policies in Nigeria to include political interference, political patronage, financial misappropriation and managerial inefficiency. For instance, a recent study on rural development programmes in Nigeria noted that many interventions failed to meet objectives because of policy reversals, lack of grassroots link, corruption and political interference. Implementation challenges also stem from inconsistent financing and weak institutional linkages. Moreover, climate change, urban migration, youth unemployment and informal rural economies add to complexity.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the 'New Institutionalism Theory' propounded by Douglas North (1990) as a framework for analysis. The New Institutionalism Theory posits that institutions are the fundamental structures that determine the rules of interaction within societies.

The New Institutionalism Theory is considered relevant to this study because it recognized the existence of strong institutions in advanced economies, which serve as

catalysts to their growth, as well as weak institutions in developing economies, which invariable undermine their stability. More so, developed economies possess institutions that protect property rights, enforce contracts, and lower transaction costs, thereby creating incentives for productive activity. Many international development agencies, notably the World Bank in the 1990s, embraced the idea that "institutions matter".

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Survey research design was adopted for this study. This method of data collection was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to seek information that may not be available in secondary data sources such as journals, textbooks, website publications etc.

Sources of Data Collection

Data for this study were elicited from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data for this study were obtained from questionnaires. This method of data collection is considered appropriate because it not only provided first-hand information needed for the study but also allowed respondents to make contributions to the work through their diverse views. On the other hand, the secondary sources of data for this study were obtained through critical review of relevant literature and materials from text books, internet sources, journals, official reports, workshops and seminar papers.

Method of Data Collection

Survey method was adopted to elicit relevant information from respondents who are knowledgeable in this area.

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprised rural dwellers in selected communities within Lancashire County, United Kingdom, and Eastern Nigeria. Lancashire County has an estimated rural population of approximately 266,700 residents (Lancashire County Council, 2024), while Eastern Nigeria has an estimated rural population of about 9.4 million people based on national demographic estimates (United Nations, 2025; Worldometer, 2026). This population selection also aligns with previous rural development studies (Chambers, 1995; Ellis, 2000; OECD, 2020; FAO, 2023). Hence, the study sample was drawn scientifically from these populations.

Sample Size Determination

Based on the target population, this study focused on the rural dwellers in the eastern part of the country 9,400,000 plus the estimate

population of 266,700 peoples in Lancashire live in areas classified as rural within the county council area.

A normal confidence level of 95% and error tolerance of 5% was used. We therefore, determined the sample size using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula which is given as:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)2}$$

Where:

N = Population size

e = Error of tolerance

1 = Statistical constant

i.e

N = 9,400,000 + 266,700 = 9,666,700

e = 5% or 0.05%

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)2}$$

$$9{,}666{,}700 \times 0.0025 = 24{,}166.75$$

$$1 + 24{,}166.75 = 24{,}167.75$$

$$n = \frac{9{,}666{,}700}{24{,}167.75} \approx 400.1$$

= 400

Sampling Technique

Purposive Sampling Technique was adopted to elicit requisite information from respondents who are well-informed about the subject matter of the study. This study was carried out using the responses from questionnaires.

Summary of Findings

This study examined the policy issues and their implications for sustainable rural development in Nigeria and the United Kingdom between 2014 and 2024. Specifically, it investigated the influence of principal policy issues, institutional arrangements and policy delivery mechanisms, infrastructure investments, and financing models with stakeholder engagement strategies on sustainable rural development. Data collected from 392 respondents were analysed using descriptive statistics and one-sample *Z*-tests in SPSS version 26. Overall, the findings indicate that sustainable rural development is significantly influenced by effective policy implementation, strong institutional frameworks, adequate infrastructure investments, and inclusive financing and stakeholder engagement mechanisms. The specific findings of the study are summarized as follows:

1. Principal policy issues were found to have a statistically significant influence on sustainable rural development in Nigeria and the United Kingdom between 2014 and 2024,

leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis ($p < 0.05$).

2. Institutional arrangements and policy delivery mechanisms were found to have a statistically significant influence on rural development outcomes in both countries during the period under review, resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis ($p < 0.05$).
3. Infrastructure investments were found to play a statistically significant role in enabling sustainable rural development in Nigeria and the United Kingdom, indicating that investments in critical infrastructure contribute meaningfully to rural development outcomes ($p < 0.05$).
4. Financing models and stakeholder engagement strategies were found to have a statistically significant influence on sustainable rural development in Nigeria and the United Kingdom, demonstrating the importance of adequate financing mechanisms and participatory stakeholder involvement in achieving sustainable rural development objectives ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion

This study examined the policy issues and the challenge of sustainable rural development through a comparative analysis of the Nigerian and British experiences between 2014 and 2024. Guided by the New Institutionalism Theory (North, 1990), the study analyzed how policy issues, institutional arrangements, infrastructure investments, financing models, and stakeholder engagement influenced sustainable rural development in both countries. The theory provided an appropriate framework by emphasizing that effective institutions, clear rules, and efficient governance systems are essential for achieving sustainable development outcomes.

Findings revealed that principal policy issues significantly influenced sustainable rural development in both Nigeria and the United Kingdom during the period under review. This indicates that the formulation, consistency, and implementation of rural development policies remain critical determinants of rural transformation. The study further established that institutional arrangements and policy delivery mechanisms significantly shaped rural development outcomes in both countries. While the United Kingdom demonstrated relatively stronger institutional coordination, policy continuity,

and effective implementation mechanisms, Nigeria continued to experience challenges associated with weak institutional capacity, policy inconsistency, inadequate coordination, and implementation gaps.

The study also found that infrastructure investments made significant contributions to sustainable rural development. The availability of rural roads, electricity, healthcare facilities, water supply, communication networks, and educational infrastructure was shown to improve agricultural productivity, rural economic activities, and the overall quality of life of rural residents. Furthermore, the findings established that financing models and stakeholder engagement strategies significantly influenced sustainable rural development. Sustainable financing, effective public-private collaboration, and active participation of local communities were found to enhance policy implementation and improve development outcomes.

In summary, the comparative analysis demonstrates that sustainable rural development depends not only on the existence of sound policies but also on strong institutions, adequate infrastructure, sustainable financing, and inclusive stakeholder participation. The British experience provides useful policy lessons that Nigeria can adapt while taking into account its unique socio-economic, political, and institutional realities. Therefore, strengthening institutional effectiveness, ensuring policy consistency, increasing investment in rural infrastructure, and promoting participatory governance remain essential for achieving sustainable rural development in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and in line with the specific objectives, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Federal Government of Nigeria should institutionalize a coherent, evidence-based, and long-term rural development policy framework that promotes policy consistency, minimizes political interference, and ensures regular policy review to address emerging rural development challenges and achieve sustainable development outcomes.

2. Government should strengthen the institutional framework for rural development by improving intergovernmental coordination, enhancing the capacity of implementing agencies, and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems that ensure effective

policy implementation, accountability, and continuity across all levels of government.

3. Government should prioritize sustained investment in critical rural infrastructure, including transportation networks, electricity, potable water, healthcare, education, irrigation facilities, and digital connectivity, as a strategic means of enhancing agricultural productivity, stimulating rural enterprises, and promoting inclusive and sustainable rural economic development.

4. Government should strengthen institutional capacity and adopt inclusive stakeholder engagement approaches by actively involving local governments, rural communities, civil society organizations, the private sector, and development partners in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of rural development policies, while adapting relevant best practices from the United Kingdom to Nigeria's socio-economic and institutional context.

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