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GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN IMO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically assesses the impact of government intervention programmes on sustainable economic development in Imo State, Nigeria. It examines key initiatives across employment, infrastructure, human capital development, and environmental sustainability, analyzing their reported achievements against prevailing socio-economic indicators. The analysis reveals notable progress in specific areas, such as the engagement of thousands in entrepreneurship and digital skills training, significant infrastructure upgrades, and the expansion of health insurance coverage. However, the report also identifies persistent systemic challenges, including governance weaknesses, inconsistent funding, and insecurity, which constrain the full realization of these programmes' potential. The findings underscore that while targeted

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interventions show promise, achieving comprehensive and sustainable economic development in Imo State necessitates addressing these underlying structural impediments and fostering long-term, consistent, and inclusive implementation strategies.

Keywords: Imo State, Government Intervention, Sustainable Development, Economic Development, Unemployment

Introduction

Imo State, located in Nigeria's South East, is a populous region with an estimated 5.5 million inhabitants as of 2022. Its economy is driven by agriculture (palm oil) and natural resources (crude oil, natural gas). In 2021, Imo State's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) based on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) was estimated at $49.69 billion, ranking 4th nationally, with a GDP per capita of $7,828 (3rd nationally). Its Human Development Index (HDI) in 2022 was 0.693, categorized as medium, also placing it 3rd among states in Nigeria (Isidiho & Sabran, 2015).

Despite these strengths, Imo State has faced significant socio-economic challenges. Unemployment was a major issue, with a rate of 56.6% in Q4 2020, the highest in Nigeria, and approximately 50% of the state's 3.5 million young population reported as jobless. This high joblessness was deemed a "recipe for disaster" by government officials. More recent data from 2023 indicates a dramatic reduction to 10.9%. This shift could be due to effective interventions or changes in data methodology by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). Regardless, historical high unemployment underscores the need for state interventions (Egwuonwu et al, 2017).

Poverty remains a concern. In 2018, 19.3% of Imo citizens lived on less than $2.15 per day, a figure reportedly worsening. Nationally, nearly half of all Nigerians (47%) were projected to live in poverty by 2024. Access to basic amenities is also challenging; in 2018, 89.6% of households lacked public drinking water and 88.6% lacked sanitary waste disposal facilities. These conditions highlight the urgent need for comprehensive government intervention to foster sustainable development (Ogbede et al, 2024).

Overview of Sustainable Economic Development

Sustainable development is defined as meeting present needs without

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compromising future generations' ability to meet their own, balancing economic growth, social progress, and environmental protection. Nigeria, like other nations, has committed to integrating the UN's 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into its policies (Mbah & Obiagu, 2019).

While a national study using Adjusted Net Savings Rate found GDP per capita and natural rents as key determinants of sustainable development, with unemployment having no significant statistical impact, Imo State prioritizes unemployment reduction. The state views high unemployment as a "recipe for disaster" and a source of "social warming", recognizing that it undermines social stability and long-term growth. This local focus on immediate human well-being is a pragmatic response to critical challenges impeding holistic development (Ogechi & Igbojekwe, 2012).

Purpose and Scope

This paper assesses government intervention programmes in Imo State, evaluating their impact on sustainable economic development across various sectors. It analyzes reported achievements against socio-economic indicators, identifies challenges, and proposes recommendations. The scope focuses on programmes initiated or significantly advanced by the Imo State Government, particularly under Governor Hope Uzodimma's administration since January 2020, using data up to 2025.

Government Intervention Programmes for Economic Development in Imo State: Overview of Policy Frameworks (IMOBERAP, SABER).

The Imo State Government guides its economic development through the Imo State Business-Enabling Reform Action Plan (IMOBERAP) for 2024. Approved on December 13, 2023, IMOBERAP aims to foster a knowledge-based economy and diversify growth sources. It acts as an annual reform tool, coordinating priority reforms in six key areas: starting a business, construction permits, property registration, tax payment, cross-border trade, and access to electricity and credit. The goal is to strengthen business-enabling reforms, increasing economic size, human capital, opportunities, and jobs, while establishing social safety

nets (Ekanem, 2014).

IMOBERAP aligns with the Federal Government's $750 million World Bank-funded State Action on Business Enabling Reforms (SABER) programme. This alignment allows Imo State to leverage federal and international funding, best practices, and technical assistance, enhancing reform credibility and attracting investment for more sustainable outcomes within a national framework.

Key Programmes and Initiatives by Sector:

Employment and Entrepreneurship

Addressing high unemployment is a central focus, primarily through the One Kindred, One Business Initiative (OKOBI) and the Skill Up Imo Programme.

The One Kindred, One Business Initiative (OKOBI) aims to tackle unemployment and stimulate economic growth through a group-based entrepreneurship model. It has registered approximately 400 businesses and engaged over 10,000 people within 18 months. Data shows 216 businesses established, with Orlu Zone leading (110), followed by Owerri (87) and Okigwe (19). Academic research indicates OKOBI reduced unemployment ($r = 0.568$, $p = 0.001$) and criminality ($r = 0.681$, $p = 0.001$) by engaging youth in vocational skills and community enterprises. Its success is linked to the "Igbo Akuruoulo principle" (investing at home), fostering community ownership and sustainable outcomes (Odinka et al, 2023).

The Skill Up Imo Programme complements OKOBI by training residents in modern competencies. The state aims to train 300,000 people in digital skills, with over 25,000 already trained. This initiative seeks to transform young people into employers. The dual approach of Skill Up Imo (digital skills) and OKOBI (group-based entrepreneurship) acknowledges diverse unemployment challenges and varied skill sets, providing multiple pathways to economic empowerment (Akamike & Okonkwo, 2024).

The Federal MSME Loan Scheme has also supported entrepreneurship, disbursing ₦1.48 billion to 29,000 small business owners in Imo State. These loans, up to ₦5 million at 9% interest, have a three-month moratorium and up to three-year tenure. The Imo State Investment Promotion Agency (ISIPA) facilitates access to these and

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other micro-finance opportunities by partnering with institutions like CBN, BoI, and SMEDAN (Modibbo, 2021).

Infrastructure Development

Governor Hope Uzodimma's administration has initiated a "total infrastructural revolution" to reposition Imo for sustainable socio-economic development. A core component is extensive road networks. Over 62 roads (189 km) are completed, with 53 more (375.8 km) under construction. Notable projects include the 35.1-kilometer Owerri-Elele Road and the nearly completed 46-kilometer Owerri-Mbaise-Obowo-Umuahia road. These projects aim to enhance connectivity, facilitate economic growth, and improve safety and security. Beyond roads, the drive includes urban infrastructure like flyovers (e.g., Assumpta Roundabout), balloon technology for flood control in Owerri, and restored public water supply. Upgrades to Sam Mbakwe International Airport, including night landing facilities, are expected to boost economic potential. The Rural Access and Agricultural Marketing Project (RAAMP), supported by the World Bank and AFD, improves rural access and agricultural marketing, reduces post-harvest losses, and generates youth employment by enhancing rural road networks and agro-logistics (Uche, 2019).

The state's commitment also extends to industrial development, including the revival of Adapalm Nigeria Limited and the Orashi Electricity Company project to power the Special Energy Free Trade Zone. Ongoing projects like refinery construction and the Oguta Lake-Atlantic Ocean dredging project underscore industrial aspirations, with a Naval Base and the Free Trade Zone solidifying Imo's emerging industrial hub status. This integrated approach addresses critical bottlenecks in energy, water, and logistics, building industrial capacity for comprehensive economic development (Ogbonna et al, 2016).

Human Capital Development (Education and Health)

Imo State invests in human capital through its education and health sectors. In education, Governor Uzodimma's administration emphasizes reforms, infrastructure, and teacher training. Youth empowerment programs focus on entrepreneurship, vocational training, and digital literacy to foster critical thinking and prepare youth for the job market.

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However, challenges persist: a lack of new teacher employment impacts education quality, and administrative functions like common entrance examinations have been neglected. Budgetary allocations for education are inconsistent; while ₦25 billion was allocated in 2023, it dropped to ₦7.42 billion in 2025, raising concerns about sustained commitment. Public perception also reflects dissatisfaction regarding unfulfilled promises, such as employing more teachers (Oparaojiaku & Ekumankama, 2020).

In health, the government revitalizes primary healthcare and expands health insurance coverage. Strategic meetings led to implementation committees in LGAs and communities to ensure enrollment across all 656 communities, promoting grassroots ownership. The ImoCare Health Insurance Program aims to extend coverage to formal and informal sectors, with the government paying premiums for civil servants and pensioners to reduce out-of-pocket expenses and promote equitable access. The Imo State Health Insurance Agency (IMSHIA) targets enrolling 2.7 million residents across 654 communities. Plans include constructing and equipping prototype PHCs in each of the 305 INEC Wards, staffed by newly recruited healthcare workers, and ensuring each LGA has a functional general hospital. A World Bank-funded project upgrades 100 PHCs to improve immunization and malaria services. The World Health Organization (WHO) projects a "200% increase in real GDP and 200% increase in the number of jobs created over 5 years" from health insurance implementation, highlighting health investment as a direct economic driver (Chris, 2020).

Environmental Sustainability

Imo State is proactively addressing environmental sustainability. The Ministry of Environment and Sanitation, with SPACES FOR CHANGE, is drafting a comprehensive Climate Change Policy since September 2024. This involves broad stakeholder engagement to build awareness and gather evidence of climate change impacts (Ekanem, 2014). The policy integrates renewable energy, climate-smart agriculture, and nature-based solutions to address flooding, gully erosion, health crises, displacement, and food insecurity. It also outlines action plans, funding mechanisms, and opportunities to reduce carbon emissions. Specific

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projects include expanding rubber plantations for carbon sequestration and clearing waterways to prevent flooding and enhance aquatic habitats. This proactive policy development signifies a shift from reactive problem-solving to integrated environmental governance, building resilience and reducing future economic and social costs of environmental degradation (Pat-Mbano & Ezirim, 2015).

Impact Assessment of Intervention Programmes:

Economic Impact: Employment, Entrepreneurship, and GDP

Government interventions have impacted Imo State's economy, particularly employment and entrepreneurship. The unemployment rate reportedly dropped from 56.6% in Q4 2020 to 10.9% in 2023, though data methodology changes warrant caution (Isidiho & Sabran, 2015). OKOBI has engaged over 10,000 individuals and registered 400 businesses in 18 months, with academic studies supporting its positive impact on unemployment and criminality. The Skill Up Imo Programme has trained over 25,000 in digital skills. The Federal MSME Loan Scheme disbursed ₦1.48 billion to 29,000 small businesses. While these numbers are significant, they represent a fraction of the 1.75 million jobless youth in 2020, indicating a need for scaling up or broader job creation strategies (Diejomaoh, & Eboh, 2012).

In terms of GDP and economic growth, Imo State's economy shows resilience, with a reported GDP of $13.5 billion and a 15.6% growth rate, and a 2021 GDP (PPP) of $49.69 billion (4th nationally). Infrastructure projects, especially roads, aim to facilitate economic growth by improving connectivity and trade. Industrial revitalization (Adapalm, Orashi Electricity Company) also seeks to create jobs and revenue, contributing to the state's industrial renaissance (Nwanne, 2015).

Social Impact: Human Capital Development and Well-being

Interventions also aim to improve human capital and well-being. Imo State's HDI of 0.693 (3rd nationally) suggests better human development compared to Nigeria's overall low index. Youth empowerment initiatives, including education and skill-building, are crucial for leadership and well-being (Ikenga, &Ighoshemu, 2022). In education, despite reforms and infrastructure focus, challenges persist: lack of new teacher employment and neglected administrative tasks undermine

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quality. Insecurity also negatively impacts school attendance, motivation, and learning readiness (Aina, & Salau, 1992).

In the health sector, the ImoCare Health Insurance Program is a key intervention, aiming to reduce out-of-pocket expenses and expand coverage to 2.7 million residents. This is vital given that 92.3% paid for health services out-of-pocket in 2018, often leading to poverty. WHO projects a "200% increase in real GDP and 200% increase in jobs" from health insurance. Upgrading 100 PHCs also improves immunization and malaria services. The interconnectedness of insecurity affecting education and financial barriers to healthcare highlights the need for holistic solutions (Abang, 2015).

Environmental Impact: Climate Action and Resource Management

Imo State's proactive approach to environmental sustainability is evident in its Climate Change Policy drafting, in collaboration with SPACES FOR CHANGE. This policy integrates renewable energy, climate-smart agriculture, and nature-based solutions to address local impacts like flooding, erosion, and food insecurity. Projects like expanding rubber plantations for carbon sequestration and enlarging waterways for flood control also contribute. This shift to proactive environmental governance is crucial for long-term sustainable development, building resilience and reducing future costs (Osita-Njoku, & Princewill, 2015).

Cross-Sectorial Linkages and Synergies

Imo State's programmes show emerging cross-sectorial synergies. The partnership between IMSHIA and OKOBI aims to strengthen entrepreneurial models by reducing healthcare financial burdens on businesses, linking social welfare to economic empowerment. Extensive infrastructure development, particularly roads, directly supports agricultural marketing and logistics through RAAMP, improving market access and reducing post-harvest losses. The importance of security is also evident, as stability in areas like Orlu Zone enables infrastructure development and economic recovery. These examples demonstrate an evolving understanding that integrated approaches are more effective for long-term sustainable growth (Egwuonwu, 2018).

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Challenges to Programme Implementation and Sustainability

Despite efforts, government intervention programmes in Imo State face significant systemic challenges.

Governance and Institutional Weaknesses

Pervasive challenges include chronic corruption, policy inconsistency, weak institutions, and political patronage. National programs like the Anchor Borrowers Programme have high loan default rates (76%) due to political loyalists receiving funds without expertise. Misuse of public funds (e.g., ₦81 billion in fake contracts) and "ghost workers" highlight financial mismanagement. Politicization and bureaucracy also hinder implementation. In education, public dissatisfaction stems from unfulfilled promises like teacher employment, eroding trust. These systemic issues require deep-seated reforms.

Funding and Resource Constraints

Inconsistent and inadequate funding threatens programme sustainability. Education budget allocations fluctuate significantly, from ₦25 billion in 2023 to ₦7.42 billion in 2025, raising concerns about sustained commitment (Ajie, &Wokekoro, 2012). This inconsistency hinders effective planning, staff retention, and infrastructure maintenance, leading to stop-start progress and eroding public confidence. Many PHCs reportedly lack basic utilities, and questions exist regarding fund misappropriation for maintenance. SMEs also face limited resources and financial constraints (Nwankwo, 2015).

Insecurity and Socio-Political Factors

Pervasive insecurity significantly impedes development. The state has seen increased violence, including attacks on government facilities and kidnappings. This instability directly impacts education, leading to declining school attendance due to safety fears, affecting pupils' motivation and readiness to learn. Destruction of public assets in areas like Orlu Zone further highlights economic consequences. Security is a fundamental prerequisite for economic and social development; without it, investments are undermined. Political controversies surrounding leadership transitions can also divert focus and resources (Akamike, & Okonkwo, 2024).

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Data Gaps and Monitoring Limitations

Effective governance and sustainable development rely on robust data. However, Imo State faces challenges with reliable and timely data for planning and decision-making in the health system. Similar issues exist in social programs, with "no clear records of repayment or follow-up" for initiatives like TraderMoni. Discrepancies in reported figures for OKOBI (400 vs. 216 businesses) illustrate data inconsistencies. These data deficiencies hinder accurate impact assessment, resource allocation, and accountability, creating a "blind spot" in governance and undermining sustainability (Modibbo et al, 2021).

Recommendations for Enhanced Sustainable Economic Development

To enhance impact and sustainability, a multi-faceted approach addressing programmatic and systemic challenges is essential.

Strengthening Governance and Accountability

Implement stringent anti-corruption frameworks, transparent public procurement, and public access to contract awards. Strengthen institutions and ensure policy consistency to rebuild public trust and attract investment. Address political patronage through merit-based appointments and transparent beneficiary selection for all programs (Pat-Mbano,&Ezirim, 2015).

Optimizing Resource Allocation and Funding Mechanisms

Prioritize consistent and adequate funding for critical sectors like education and health, aligning budgets with policy objectives. Ensure long-term financial commitment, not fluctuating allocations. Improve financial management and oversight to prevent fund misappropriation. Explore innovative funding, such as public-private partnerships and international collaborations.

Enhancing Programme Design and Implementation

Significantly scale up successful programs like OKOBI and Skill Up Imo to address the magnitude of unemployment. Continue leveraging culturally embedded models (e.g., Akuruoulo principle in OKOBI) for

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community ownership and sustainability. Prioritize integrated infrastructure development supporting multiple sectors (transport, energy, water) to maximize economic and social returns. Accelerate business-enabling reforms, especially digital platforms, to improve ease of doing business and attract investment (Nosiri, & Nwachukwu, 2016).

Fostering Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Strengthen partnerships among government, private sector, civil society, and international bodies (World Bank, WHO, SPACES FOR CHANGE). These collaborations facilitate resource mobilization, technical expertise, and broader impact. Enhance community engagement in program design and implementation to ensure relevance, ownership, and effectiveness (Duru, 2014).

Conclusion

The assessment of government intervention programmes in Imo State reveals both progress and persistent challenges. Notable successes include employment and entrepreneurship initiatives (OKOBI, Skill Up Imo), significant infrastructure upgrades, and expanded healthcare coverage (ImoCare). The proactive Climate Change Policy also marks a positive shift towards integrated environmental governance. However, systemic issues constrain full impact. Governance weaknesses (corruption, inconsistency, and patronage), inconsistent funding (especially in education), pervasive insecurity, and data gaps undermine effectiveness and sustainability. In conclusion, while Imo State demonstrates a clear commitment to sustainable economic development with promising initiatives, achieving comprehensive and enduring impact requires addressing these underlying structural impediments. A concerted and sustained effort to strengthen governance, ensure consistent funding, mitigate insecurity, and improve data-driven accountability is crucial for a truly sustainable and inclusive economic future for Imo State

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