Church–State Partnership for Sustainable Development Goals In Nigeria

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Abstract
Nigeria faces significant socio-economic challenges that hinder its progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, despite abundant human and natural resources, successive governments in Nigeria struggle with weak institutions, insufficient funds, insecurity and other challenges to address poverty, health, and education effectively. This paper analysed the necessity of a strategic partnership between the State and the Church towards bridging the developmental gaps observable in the country, with particular regard to the SDGs. The study adopted a hermeneutic methodology, which includes reviews of existing literature, policy documents, and scholarly discussions in the area. It also carries out a comparative analysis of existing 'secular' approaches towards addressing the SDGs, which includes scientific, legal and economic routes vis-à-vis a multi-disciplinary approach that involves Church and State, and that is centred on stewardship and human dignity. The findings of the study reveal that while historical collaborations in education and health were successful, current relations between Church and State in Nigeria are damaged by misunderstanding, mutual suspicion, and a lack of coordination. The study argues for a model of strategic understanding, where the State provides policy and funding while the Church offers moral authority and community access. Recommendations include providing mutual collaboration, establishing a faith-based contact office, and data sharing for transparency. The conclusion posits that Church-State collaboration is not merely an option but a necessary, integral, requirement for Nigeria to meet the 2030 SDG agenda and ensure inclusive, sustainable development.

Key words: Sustainable Development Goals, Africa (Nigeria), Church, State, Partnership, and Development.

1.1 Introduction

Nigeria is currently in a difficult position despite its population and abundant natural resources, which should ordinarily give it the power to lead development in Africa. Thus, while the country has a large population and abundant natural resources, it struggles with serious religious, economic and social problems, which are slowing down its growth and making it hard for the country to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These

challenges make it difficult for the country to improve the quality of life of its citizens and make governance effective, among others. Notably, the government cannot solve these problems alone. Thus, to achieve real progress, different groups in society must work together. (Adebayo, 2021). We maintain that one of the main problems of Nigeria is not a lack of ideas, but the implementation of ideas already thought out. In fact, the problem remains that different groups, including the government and civil society, are not working together effectively. (Adebayor 2021).

Admittedly, the SDGs were invented in 2015, it is the global goals designed to create a better world for everyone. A key part of these goals is to "leave no one behind", a value that is also very important to religious groups and individuals in Africa. In Nigeria, the Church has a long history of helping people, and the church is very close to people. Because of the Church's closeness to the people, it is one of the largest institutions operating within the country (Ojong & Nwagwu, 2020). This makes the Church a very important figure in the effort to achieve the SDGs.

Even though the government has tried many programs, Nigeria's progress on the SDGs is still not enough. Poverty, inequality, insecurity, and poor access to health and education are still holding the country back (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). These challenges show a simple truth, and that is: the government cannot do it alone. Real progress requires a partnership. To this end, the Church can help because it has moral influence, many branches across the country, and strong connections to the people. Historically, religious groups in Nigeria have done a lot of work in education, healthcare, and peace building, which are all part of the SDGs agenda (Ejizu,2019). However, the relationship between the Church and the State is currently weak. It is often disorganised and sometimes filled with suspicion. There is a lack of coordination and no clear plan for how they should work together for a long time. This limits how much they can achieve. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore how a strong partnership between the Church and the State can speed up the SDGs in Nigeria.

1.2 The Global Context, From MDGs to SDGs

The idea of sustainable development is not new. It became a major global topic in 1987 when the World Commission on Environment and Development published a report called Our Common Future. This report defined sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without destroying the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. However, the real push for specific goals began in the year 2000 with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs were eight goals that the world promised to achieve by 2015. They focused mostly on reducing extreme poverty, getting children into school, and stopping the spread of diseases like HIV/AIDS. While the MDGs helped many people, they had limitations. They focused mostly on developing countries and did not pay enough attention to the environment or peace (Sachs,

2015). When the MDGs expired in 2015, the United Nations (UN) introduced a new and bigger plan: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Adopted by all UN member states in September 2015, this agenda is often called Agenda 2030. Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs include 17 goals and 169 targets. They are designed for every country, rich or poor. They cover three main or critical areas: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection (United Nations, 2015). This global shift showed that the world finally understood that poverty cannot be fixed unless we also fix inequality, climate change, and weak government institutions.

1.3 The African Context, Aligning with Agenda 2063

For Africa, the SDGs came at a very important time. The continent was already trying to create its own path for the future. Thus, before the SDGs were signed, African leaders had already created a document called the Common African Position. They wanted to make sure the new global goals respected Africa's unique challenges, such as the need for infrastructure, industrialisation, and peace. In Africa, the SDGs work side-by-side with the African Union's own plan, known as Agenda 2063. The Africa We Want. While the SDGs are a global promise, Agenda 2063 is Africa's blueprint for transforming the continent into a global powerhouse of the future (African Union, 2015). Both plans share similar goals, like ending hunger, silencing guns (stopping wars), and empowering women.

However, implementing these goals in Africa is difficult. The continent faces issues like rapid population growth, climate change affecting farmers, and a lack of money to build roads and power plants, for example. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2017), Africa needs billions of dollars every year to meet these goals. Because African governments often do not have enough tax revenue, they cannot do this work alone. This is why the role of non-government actors, like religious institutions, becomes critical in the African context.

1.4 The Nigerian Context, Promise and Struggle

Nigeria, as the most populous country in Africa, is central to the success of the SDGs on the continent. If Nigeria succeeds, it lifts the whole region; if it fails, it drags the region down. Nigeria quickly adopted the SDGs in 2015 and set up the Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs (OSSAP-SDGs) to coordinate efforts. The government tried to link the SDGs to its national economic plans, such as the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP). Despite these efforts, the reality on the ground is not quite promising. For instance, a report by the United Nations Development Programme (2022) shows that Nigeria is lagging on many indicators. Poverty remains high, with millions of Nigerians living on less than a dollar a day. The education system is struggling, with many children out of school, and the healthcare system is weak. Furthermore, insecurity in the country, especially in the North East, makes it very hard to build sustainable communities. These challenges in

Nigeria reveal a gap between policy and reality. The government writes good plans, but it often lacks the capacity, funds, or reach to implement them in every village and town. This is where the gap in institutional alignment, Adebayo (2021), becomes clear. One could say that the state is trying to drive a vehicle that has no fuel. Thus, to move forward, the Nigerian state needs to partner with institutions that are already present in the communities and have the trust of the people.

1.5 World View on Sustainable Development Goals

Different experts and researchers have written about religion and the government on the Sustainable Development Goals. Many scholars have tried to understand how faith-based organisations (like the Church), in line with the government, can help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Some literature shows that while religious groups are very important for development, there is often a lack of a clear partnership system or strategy with the government. For a long time, development experts thought that religion was not important for economic growth. They believed that as a country gets richer, religion becomes less important. However, Marshall, who has worked with the World Bank, points out that religious institutions are often the oldest and most stable organisations in poor countries (2011). She argues that you cannot fight poverty effectively without involving religious groups because they understand the culture and have the trust of the people. This is very important for the SDGs, which aim to help the poorest people.

In Africa, religion is not just something people do on Sundays, but a part of everyday life. In the same vein, Gerrie Ter Haar (2011) writes that in Africa, development is not just about money (economic) but also about the spirit and community (social). She argues that international aid agencies often fail in Africa because they ignore this spiritual side. For the SDGs to work in Africa, therefore, development plans must respect the religious worldview of the people. Narrowing down to Nigeria, Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah (2011) has written extensively on the relationship between the Church and the State. Kukah argues that in Nigeria, the government has often failed to provide basic services like clean water, schools, and hospitals. Because of this failure, the Church has stepped in to fill the gap. He suggests that the Church is not just a place for prayer but a voice for the voiceless that holds the government accountable.

Supporting this view, Falola 2018) avers that religious organisations in Nigeria are the main providers of social welfare. He explains that during times of economic crisis, Nigerians turn to the Church for hope and material support. This makes the Church a critical player in achieving the SDG goals like No Poverty (SDG 1) and Zero Hunger (SDG 2). However, simply having a strong Church is not enough. Ojong and Nwagwu (2020) studied faith-based organisations in Nigeria and found a major problem: the lack of coordination. They observed that while the Church does good work, it often works in

isolation. There is no serious partnership with the government. This means that efforts are sometimes duplicated, or resources are wasted. They argue that for the SDGs to be met, there needs to be a formal strategy linking Church efforts with government policy.

Another problem is why development plans fail in Nigeria? The answer is institutional weakness (Adebayo 2021). Even when there are good ideas, the institutions (like government ministries) are too weak or disorganised to carry them out. He suggests that partnering with the Church could help strengthen these weak institutions because the Church has a disciplined structure that the government often lacks. Moreover, it is important to look at the negative side. Iheanacho (2014) warns that religion in Nigeria is not always perfect. Thus, she points out that some religious leaders are focused on making money through the prosperity gospel (2014), rather than helping the poor. She argues that for a partnership to work, the Church must also be transparent and accountable. If religious leaders are corrupt, they cannot help the government achieve sustainable development.

Finally, the literature shows a clear agreement among scholars. Marshall and Ter Haar show that religion is globally and locally essential for development. Kukah and Falola confirm that in Nigeria, the Church is already doing the work of the government. However, Ojong, Adebayo, and Iheanacho highlight the lack of coordination, weak government structures, and the need for accountability. This study hopes to find ways to solve these problems so the Church and State can work together for the SDGs.

2.1. The Secular Approach to SDGs: Science, Policy, and Human Rights

While religious groups see development as a spiritual duty, secular society views it differently. Secular society includes the government, the United Nations (UN), international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and private business organisations. For these groups, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are not about religious commandments or the afterlife. Instead, they are about using science, economics, and human rights to improve life here on earth.

The SDGs were created by the United Nations, a secular organisation. This means the goals are designed to apply to everyone, regardless of their religion. Scholar Tomalin (2015) explains that the language of the SDGs is secular. It does not mention God or scripture. Instead, it uses words like human rights, equality, and sustainability. The main idea is that every human being has dignity and deserves a good life, simply because they are human. This is often called secular humanism. A key economist behind the SDGs, Sachs (2015), argues that these goals are technical challenges, and that problems like hunger and disease can be solved if the right science is applied and adequate resources are invested.

Secular society relies on three main tools to handle development issues:

a. **Science and Technology:** When a secular organisation looks at a problem like sickness (SDG 3), they do not focus on prayer. Instead, they focus on vaccines, hospitals, and clean water. Technology is viewed as the best way to solve human suffering. For example, to address climate change (SDG 13), secular organisations look for engineering solutions like solar power and electric cars.

b. **Law and Human Rights:** A secular society uses laws to protect people. Amartya Sen (1999), in his influential work *Development as Freedom*, argues that development is about giving people rights. If women are not treated equally (SDG 5), secular society seeks to pass new laws to protect them. Strong government institutions are essential to enforce justice and maintain peace (SDG 16).

c. **Data and Economics:** In the secular world, what gets measured gets done. Governments rely heavily on statistics. In Nigeria, for instance, the National Bureau of Statistics tracks indicators like literacy rates, healthcare access, and inflation to guide policy decisions. Evidence-based planning ensures resources are allocated efficiently and goals are monitored effectively.

In Nigeria, the secular approach is led by the government. Although many Nigerian politicians are personally religious, the State itself is defined as secular in the Constitution (Section 10). The Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs (OSSAP-SDGs) coordinates efforts using government budgets and policy papers, not religious texts. The private sector also plays a role; companies like Dangote Group or commercial banks support the SDGs through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs, building schools, clinics, and infrastructure.

Modernisation and technology are slowly increasing the popularity of secular values, especially among young people in urban areas who look to science for solutions (Ede, 2019). The main strength of the secular approach is its inclusivity. It does not favour one religion over another, allowing Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists to work under one framework. It is also highly organised and professional.

However, a weakness of a purely secular approach is that it can feel distant or impersonal. In a deeply religious country like Nigeria, development initiatives that ignore faith might fail to connect with the hearts of the people. For instance, if the government instructs citizens to abandon a cultural practice for scientific reasons, they may resist. Conversely, if a religious leader explains the same guidance in a moral or spiritual context, compliance is more likely (Deneulin,2009).

2.2 The Ecclesial View: Faith, Stewardship, and Human Dignity

While the secular world views the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a list of political and economic targets, the Church sees them as a moral and spiritual duty. For the Church, development is not just about increasing a country's resources or building infrastructure; it is about protecting God's creation and restoring the dignity of human beings. The Church's interest in development originates from the Bible. Central to this view is stewardship. In Genesis 2:15, God commands humans to care for the earth. This implies that protecting the environment (SDG 13 and 15) is a moral responsibility, not just a technical task.

Another key concept is the *Imago Dei*, the belief that every human is created in the image of God. Poverty (SDG 1) or hunger (SDG 2) is seen as an affront to God's image in humans. African theology emphasises reconstruction, where Christians actively rebuild broken societies as a form of worship (Mana, 2002). Pope Francis further develops this idea through Integral Human Development, arguing that addressing only material needs is insufficient. Spiritual and social well-being must also be considered. In *Laudato Si*' (2015), he critiques the idea that technology and money alone can save the world, highlighting that the cries of the poor and the earth are interconnected.

Unlike the government, which relies on tax money and bureaucracy, the Church uses *Diakonia* service rooted in love. In Nigeria, the Church has been contributing to SDG-related goals long before the UN formulated them. Missionary schools maintain high educational standards even when public schools fail, and Church-run hospitals provide healthcare for those who cannot afford private care. The Church also functions as a Prophetic Voice, holding the government accountable. Leaders like Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah speak out against corruption and neglect, advocating for peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16). While the Church partners with the State, it also critiques purely technocratic approaches that treat people as statistics rather than human beings (Deneulin,2009).

For the Church, achieving the SDGs is about more than meeting a UN deadline—it is about bringing God's justice and peace into society. By combining moral guidance, service, and advocacy, the Church complements the secular approach, ensuring that development addresses both human dignity and spiritual well-being.

3.0 DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

3.1 Church and State Partnership: A Strategic Alliance for Development

The central argument of this study is simple: Nigeria faces significant development challenges that no single group can solve alone. Separately, the secular approach (government, science, law) and the ecclesial approach (Church, faith, moral values) are both powerful. Yet, to achieve the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, these two forces must work together. Historically, the idea was that the Church should focus only on spiritual matters while the State should focus on material concerns, a separation of powers. However, in a developing country like Nigeria, this separation is impractical. Poverty, disease, and ignorance affect both body and soul. Therefore, institutions that care for the soul (Church) and those that care for the body (State) must cooperate strategically.

This partnership works on the principle of complementarity: the Church and the State have different strengths that fit together like pieces of a puzzle. The State has the resources and policy tools, while the Church has the trust, grassroots reach, and moral authority necessary to implement development projects effectively.

3.2 The Strengths of the State (Hardware)

The State controls the hardware of development in Nigeria. It collects taxes and revenue, builds infrastructure, enacts laws, and maintains security through police and military forces. The government has the capacity to provide the material resources and legal framework needed for large-scale development initiatives. However, it often lacks trust and grassroots reach, limiting its effectiveness in fully implementing the SDGs.

3.3 The Strengths of the Church (Software)

The Church controls the software development. Nigerians tend to trust religious leaders more than politicians. For example, when a pastor endorses a vaccine, people are more likely to accept it compared to government directives. The Church is present in every village, giving it unparalleled reach. Additionally, it teaches values like honesty, discipline, and social responsibility, a fuel that makes development work sustainable. Together, the State provides the means (money and policy), and the Church provides the method (delivery and trust). This synergy produces results that neither can achieve alone. For instance, government-funded schools run by the Church ensure education is accessible, while the Church ensures moral education alongside academic instruction.

3.4 Institutionalising the Partnership

For this partnership to be effective, it must move from informal cooperation to formalised agreements. Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) can clearly define responsibilities: the State provides resources, and the Church provides delivery mechanisms. Transparency and accountability are essential. The Church must remain independent and act as a prophetic voice, holding the State accountable when necessary. A faith-inclusive approach is also critical. Both Christian and Muslim organisations should collaborate with the State to ensure equitable development across religious lines.

4.0 FINDINGS

From the analysis of the Church-State partnership in Nigeria towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), several key findings emerge:

a. Complementary Strengths of Church and State

i. The State controls the "hardware" of development, including funding, infrastructure, laws, and security.

ii. The Church controls the "software," with deep grassroots reach, moral authority, and influence over communities.

iii. When effectively combined, these strengths create a synergy where the result is greater than the sum of individual efforts.

b. Weak and Informal Partnerships

i. Current collaborations between the Church and State are often ad hoc, based on personal relationships rather than formal agreements.

ii. This lack of structured coordination leads to duplicated efforts, inefficiencies, and limited impact on SDG goals.

c. Barriers to Effective Collaboration

i. Institutional weaknesses in government, including poor capacity, insufficient funds, and a lack of data, hinder meaningful partnerships.

ii. Politicisation of religion and the presence of religious extremism create risks that may destabilise partnerships.

iii. Within the Church, challenges include limited professional expertise and sometimes a lack of transparency in project management.

d. Opportunities for Improved SDG Implementation

i. The SDGs provide a global framework with clear targets that both Church and State can rally around.

ii. Nigeria's large youth population presents opportunities for programs in education, employment, and social development.

iii. Existing Church infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and community networks, provides a foundation for scalable interventions.

e. Need for Mutual Accountability and Data Sharing

i. Effective collaboration requires transparency from both sectors, including financial accountability from the Church and accurate data provision from the State.

ii. Shared monitoring of development projects can reduce corruption, improve project outcomes, and ensure that interventions reach the intended beneficiaries.

f. Cultural and Moral Alignment

i. For development efforts to succeed, the State must respect moral and religious values, while the Church should adopt technical and professional approaches in project planning and execution.

ii. Understanding each other's "language" – moral for the Church and technical for the State – is essential to minimize friction and build lasting partnerships.

The findings reveal that while Nigeria has both the resources and institutional presence to achieve the SDGs, the current relationship between Church and State is insufficiently structured. Without deliberate coordination, mutual accountability, and professionalisation of projects, the country risks underutilising its full potential. A formalised partnership that leverages the complementary strengths of Church and State is therefore critical to ensuring inclusive and sustainable development.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Nigeria is at a crucial turning point where vast resources contrast with ongoing underdevelopment, and government efforts alone remain insufficient to address national challenges. This study highlights that the disconnect between Church and State in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a significant missed opportunity. While the State contributes policy, funding, and infrastructure, the Church offers moral guidance, trust, and grassroots reach. Their complementary strengths show that effective development requires structured collaboration, including formal partnerships, data sharing, and mutual accountability. Ultimately, bridging the gap between political authority and moral influence is essential for achieving the SDGs in Nigeria and ensuring inclusive, sustainable progress.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluation of the current Church-State partnership in Nigeria, several concrete actions are necessary to ensure effective collaboration for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030:

a. Establish a Permanent Coordination Office: The government should create a dedicated office, possibly within the Ministry of Budget and National Planning or OSSAP-SDGs, focused on coordinating with Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs). This office would serve as a bridge, ensuring that the Church is consulted during policy formulation and project planning, rather than after implementation.

b. Simplify Legal Processes for Faith-Based Projects: Registration, tax exemptions, and other bureaucratic procedures for church-run clinics, schools, and social programs should be simplified. This encourages transparency, reduces barriers, and allows religious institutions to serve vulnerable communities more effectively.

c. **Data Sharing Between Church and State:** Government data, such as health, education, and poverty statistics, should be shared with Church institutions. This ensures that development interventions target the right communities and that projects are guided by accurate information.

d. **Professionalisation of Church-Led Development Programs:** Faith-based development offices, such as Catholic Caritas or JDPC, should be run by trained professionals, doctors, teachers, and accountants, rather than relying solely on clergy. While spiritual guidance remains central, technical expertise ensures efficiency, accountability, and sustainability.

e. **Transparency and Accountability:** Churches must provide full transparency in managing funds for development projects. Every naira from government grants or donations must be accounted for, building trust and strengthening partnerships.

f. **Affordable Education Initiatives:** The Church should make education more accessible to the poor through scholarship programs and support for low-income students, addressing inequality and advancing SDG 1 (No Poverty).

g. **National Partnership Council for Sustainable Development:** A council comprising government ministers and top religious leaders from both Christian and Muslim bodies should meet at least twice a year to review Nigeria's SDG progress, evaluate projects, and create a formal platform for dialogue.

h. **Joint Monitoring of Development Projects:** Government engineers and Church community committees should collaborate to monitor projects such as boreholes, schools, or clinics. This ensures quality, prevents corruption, and guarantees that development initiatives benefit communities as intended.

i. **Learning Each Other's "Language":**
   - The State should respect the moral and ethical perspectives of the Church.
   - The Church should understand technical and policy language, using data, budgets, and timelines when proposing projects.

Through the implementation of these recommendations, Nigeria can move beyond fragmented efforts, creating a synergy between the State and Church that makes the SDGs more than just policy documents; they become tangible improvements in the lives of ordinary Nigerians.

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