

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Strategic Sustainable Development: An Integrated Evaluation of Economic, Environmental, and Social Welfare in Nigeria

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Abstract

The current study focuses on the integrated assessment of the effect of some Nigeria socioeconomic strategies on the development of Nigeria in the economy, environment and social welfare. A mixed method approach was used to gather and analyse the data of this study. An ex-post-facto research design and secondary data econometric analysis from 1990 to 2022, along with a qualitative content analysis of Nigeria's National sustainability policies, was used. The real GDP per capita, GHG, CO₂, and other hazardous gas emissions due to the deforestation, as well as social welfare included in the model as key metrics of were quantitatively evaluated and analysed. The findings of the study, from the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test, Johansen co-integration, FMOLS, and a thorough check of the DOLS, indicate that GHG emissions and deforestation of per capita income and human development of the country drop significantly, while foreign direct investment of the country has a positive impact, although it may take a long time. The rise of poverty and social welfare strata and the rise of the degrading environment of the country (i.e. confirming the economics-environmental-social welfare correlation). The study concludes that Nigeria needs integrated approaches that highlight the extension of renewable energy sources, the strengthening of institutions, the enhancement of governance in the forests, and greater investment in people. It advocates that Nigeria renewable energy policies should focus on cross-sectoral sustainability and the SDGs.

Keywords: Economics; environmental; Nigeria; social welfare; sustainable development

1. Introduction

In every country, the development of the economy, the enhancement of the social welfare of the people, and the protection of the environment have to be done in a sustainable way that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs. This has been the case since the sustainability development policy adopted aft. The challenge is greater for the developing world like Nigeria where there is persistent and high poverty, lack of economic diversification, and rising poverty. Nigeria, like many other developing economies is trapped in a paradox where the economic activities depend on the available natural resources. Studies have shown that the natural resource based economic activities are the ones that drive deforestation, increase the emission of greenhouse gasses, and degrade the welfare of the people. Addressing Nigeria's sustainable development challenges requires a clear understanding of how environmental conditions, foreign investment,

and social welfare interact with overall economic performance (Adeleye et al., 2022; Nwosu & Okafor, 2023). This study therefore evaluates sustainable development strategies by jointly examining economic, environmental, and social dimensions through a combination of econometrics analysis and conceptual review. The method is based on the Triple Bottom Line framework (Elkington, 1997) and the theory of sustainable development that emphasize the need for balanced and inclusive development planning.

The main aim of the study is to assess the sustainable development strategies in Nigeria using economic, environmental and social welfare indicators. The specific objectives are to identify and assess the main strategies that enhance sustainable economic growth, environmental protection and social welfare in Nigeria, study the long-run relationship between economic growth, environmental quality and social welfare indicators, and finally, assess national policies for sustainability and identify implementation gaps. The study is guided by the following research question: what are the strategies for sustainable economic growth, environmental protection and social welfare in Nigeria? What is the long term interaction between economic, environmental and social welfare indicators? What are the gaps in the present sustainability policies in Nigeria? The overall structure of this paper is as follows: section one is the introduction; section two is a literature review; section three is the research methodology, explaining the mixed research design, data collection, and analysis methods; section four presents the research results and discussion; section five is the conclusion which include summarizing the research contributions, limitation, recommendation, and proposing future directions.

2. Literature review

2.1 Empirical Literature

Recent empirical work expands this understanding to welfare and institutional considerations. Ali et al. (2021) have argued that carbon emissions and deforestation are detrimental to output and human development in developing economies. They find that FDI only helps growth in the presence of high quality institutions and regulatory enforcement. Similarly, Abubakar and Danladi (2020); Udoinyang et al. (2024) found that FDI has a positive effect on Nigeria's economic growth, but with limited relevance for sustainability, if there is no effective governance. The results are in line with the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory that emphasizes the need to balance the economic benefits (profit) with the environmental protection (planet) and social well-being (people).

Additional evidence from empirical studies on Nigeria (2024-2025). Onicha et al. (2024) evaluate the impact of pollution, urbanisation and solid waste on under-five mortality in Nigeria and conclude that environmental degradation leads to poorer social welfare outcomes. Their results also add to the body of evidence that environmental factors affect not only economic indicators but also the basic human development outcomes that the study considers in the form of social welfare measures (i.e., HDI and poverty). Ohioze et al. (2024) also provide evidence that environmental degradation negatively affects HDI-based sustainable development in Nigeria and that its effects are persistent in both the short- and long-run. The results directly support the study's integrated modelling of economic performance, environmental quality and social welfare. On the investment and policy space, Amade and Oyigebe (2024) provide recent evidence that FDI has a positive and significant effect on Nigeria's economic growth but only when underpinned by human capital development and institutional capacity. This result confirms the theoretical expectation in the TBL framework that strategies for economic growth need to be socially and institutionally embedded to produce sustainable outcomes. Similarly, Ogundipe et al. (2021) note that sustainable development in Africa is contingent on the simultaneous implementation of renewable energy policies, environmental policies, and social welfare policies.

The object of energy transition and environmental governance is also paid renewed interest in very recent literature. Ugah et al. (2025) review the Nigerian renewable energy policy framework and find it inadequate to meet the emission reduction and inclusive growth targets, due to weak enforcement, poor financing and regulatory barriers. Results are consistent with policy issues identified in previous research and support the qualitative review of national sustainability policies conducted in this study. At the more regional scale, Mwanga (2025) found that long-term economic growth through capital formation and technology can reduce deforestation, but short term growth through land-intensive agriculture and biomass energy increases forest loss. Such sector specific evidence highlights the importance of explicitly incorporating deforestation in growth sustainability models.

The empirical literature is unanimous in supporting three main insights, which are very consistent with the theories on which this study is based. First, the continued negative impact of environmental degradation on economic performance and social welfare, measured in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, carbon emissions and deforestation, supports the core assumptions of Sustainable Development Theory. Second, foreign direct investment can drive growth, but its sustainability gains depend on institutional quality, human development and policy alignment, in line with the “profit” dimension of the Triple Bottom Line. Third, social welfare indicators such as HDI and poverty are not merely outcomes of growth but active determinants of long-run economic performance, reinforcing the “people” dimension of the TBL framework. Despite the growing body of empirical work, several important gaps remain. Secondly, most Nigerian and African studies tend to concentrate on the economic environment nexus with little or no integration of social welfare indicators like HDI and poverty in a unified econometric framework. Second, few studies simultaneously conduct long-run econometric analysis and qualitative policy document review to assess the effectiveness of sustainability strategies and outcomes. Third, existing studies on environmental indicators or investment variables are generally separate analyses rather than a joint assessment of greenhouse gas emissions, carbon emissions, deforestation, FDI and social welfare in one long-run model. This research aims to fill these gaps by integrating economic, environmental and social welfare indicators in a unified econometric framework founded on the principles of Sustainable Development Theory and the Triple Bottom Line approach, and by complementing the quantitative findings with a qualitative analysis of Nigeria’s national sustainability policies. This thus gives a more comprehensive and policy-relevant understanding of sustainable development strategies in Nigeria.

2.2 Theoretical literature

2.2.1 Theory of Sustainable Development

The Brundtland framework emphasizes the interdependence of economic, social and environmental systems. Within the Nigerian context, the theory explains how economic growth largely driven by non-renewable resource exploitation contributes to environmental degradation and weak social welfare outcomes. It predicts negative effects from environmental degradation indicators such as greenhouse gas emissions, carbon emissions and deforestation, while expecting positive contributions from welfare-enhancing variables such as foreign direct investment and human development.

2.2.3 Triple Bottom Line Theory

Elkington’s (1997) Triple Bottom Line (People, Planet, and Profit) provides a comprehensive basis for integrating economic growth (GDP per capita), environmental quality (GHG emissions, CO₂ emissions, and

deforestation), and social well-being (HDI and poverty levels). The framework provides a multidimensional evaluation of development and justifies the inclusion of social welfare indicators in the empirical analysis.

The literature on sustainable development has repeatedly stressed the complex interdependencies between economic growth, environmental quality and social welfare, particularly in developing economies. The first cross-country and country-specific analyses show that growth in economies based on fossil fuel consumption and natural resource exploitation is often associated with environmental degradation and poor welfare outcomes. Acheampong (2021) confirms the prediction of the Sustainable Development Theory on the trade-off between growth and the environment, with huge increases in carbon emissions as a result of economic growth and energy consumption. This evidence is consistent with the Brundtland framework that growth at the cost of environmental integrity ultimately undermines long-term social and economic sustainability.

3. Methodology

The study applied a mixed method approach involving the econometrics analysis of secondary macroeconomic data from 1990 to 2022, and content analysis of major national policy documents on sustainability such as the National Adaptation Plan, Nigeria Climate Change Act, and the Energy Transition Plan. This is aligned with the objectives of the study that demand both quantitative evaluation and strategic policy evaluation. The data used were sourced from the World Bank Development Indicators, UNDP Human Development Index reports, FAO Global Forest Database and UNFCCC emissions records.

Table 1. Variables

Category	Variable	Description
Dependent	RGDPPC	Economic welfare
Independent	GHG	Green gas emission
	CO ₂	Carbon emission
	FDI	Foreign direct investment
	DEF	Deforestation
Social Welfare	HDI	Human Development Index
	POV	Poverty headcount ratio

Model Specification

$$RGDPPC = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GHG + \beta_2 CO_2 + \beta_3 FDI + \beta_4 DEF + \beta_5 HDI + \beta_6 POV + \varepsilon$$

Estimation Techniques

The study employed Augmented Dickey-Fuller unit root test, Johansen co-integration technique, Fully Modified Ordinary Least Squares (FMOLS) and Dynamic Ordinary Least Squares (DOLS) for robustness and diagnostic tests such as Breusch-Godfrey, White test and Variance Inflation Factor. The results confirm the existence of at least two long-run co-integrating relationships, indicating a stable long run association between economic growth, environmental quality and social welfare indicators.

4. Results and Discussion

The Augmented Dickey–Fuller unit root test results indicate that all variables, with the exception of foreign direct investment, are non-stationary at level but become stationary after first differencing. Foreign direct investment is stationary at level, suggesting mixed orders of integration among the variables. This outcome justifies the use of the Johansen co-integration technique and the Fully Modified Ordinary Least Squares (FMOLS) and Dynamic Ordinary Least Squares (DOLS) estimators, which are suitable for analysing long-run relationships in the presence of integrated series. The Johansen co-integration test confirms the presence of long-run equilibrium relationships between the indicators of economic welfare, environmental quality, foreign investment and social welfare. This result supports the Sustainable Development Theory that economic, environmental and social systems are structurally integrated over time rather than isolated.

Table 2. Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) Unit Root Test Results

Variable	Level	First Difference	Order of Integration
RGDPPC	Integrate of order one	Integrated of order zero***	I(1)
GHG	Integrated of order one	Integrated of order zero***	I(1)
CO ₂	Integrated of order one	Integrated of order zero***	I(1)
DEF	Integrated of order one	Integrated of order zero***	I(1)
HDI	Integrated of order one	Integrated of order zero***	I(1)
POV	Integrated of order one	Integrated of order zero***	I(1)
FDI	Integrated of order zero**	—	I(0)
Significant at 1%, Significant at 5%			

All variables except FDI were integrated of order zero (stationary) at first difference, justifying Johanson co-integration and FMOLS/DOLS estimation.

Table 3. Johanson Co-Integration Test Results

Hypothesized No. of CE(s)	Trace Statistic	5% Critical Value	Decision
None	152.37	125.62	Reject H ₀
At most 1	103.84	95.75	Reject H ₀
At most 2	69.12	69.82	Accept H ₀

Table 4. Fully Modified Ordinary Least Squares (FMOLS) Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Probability
GHG	-0.312	0.094	-3.32	0.002***
CO ₂	-0.148	0.079	-1.87	0.068**
DEF	-0.271	0.101	-2.68	0.010**
FDI	0.214	0.083	2.58	0.013**
HDI	0.436	0.122	3.57	0.001***
POV	-0.357	0.109	-3.27	0.002***
Constant	1.924	0.631	3.05	0.004

Note: ***1%, **5%, *10%

Environmental degradation variables negatively and significantly affect economic welfare while, FDI and human development significantly enhance economic growth in the long run. Poverty is a serious adverse effect and a symptom of the social constraints on sustainable growth.

Table 5. Dynamic Ordinary Least Squares (DOLS) Results (Robustness Check)

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Probability
GHG	-0.298	0.102	-2.92	0.006***
CO ₂	-0.162	0.085	-1.91	0.064*
FDI	0.229	0.089	2.57	0.014**
HDI	0.412	0.131	3.15	0.003***
POV	-0.341	0.118	-2.89	0.006***

The DOLS estimates corroborate the direction, magnitude and significance of the FMOLS results, indicating the robustness of the long-run coefficients.

Table 6. Diagnostic Test Results

Test	Statistic	Probability	Decision
Breusch-Godfrey LM	1.42	0.24	No serial correlation
White	0.97	0.51	Homoskedastic
Heteroskedasticity			
Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)	Mean = 3.12	< 10	No multicollinearity

The model satisfies key econometrics assumptions, confirming the reliability of the estimated coefficients.

Stationarity and Long-Run Relationship among Variables

4.1 Environmental Pollution and Economic Welfare

The FMOLS and DOLS estimates show that greenhouse gas emissions, carbon emissions and deforestation have statistically significant negative effects on real GDP per capita in the long run. The results indicate that environmental degradation in Nigeria decreases economic welfare via its adverse effects on productivity, human health, and the sustainability of natural resource bases. The negative coefficients correspond to the predictions

of Sustainable Development Theory which argues that growth based on activities that are harmful to the environment ultimately constrains long-term development. The results provide empirical support for the earlier evidence of Acheampong (2018) and more recent studies on Nigeria by Onicha et al. (2024) and Ohioze et al. (2024) that environmental degradation adversely affects economic output and human development outcomes. This study fills a major gap in the Nigerian sustainability literature as multiple environmental indicators are jointly modelled while existing research often studies these variables in isolation.

4.2 Sustainable Development and Foreign Direct Investment

The findings indicate that foreign direct investment has a positive and significant impact on economic welfare in both FMOLS and DOLS models. This implies that FDI encourages long-run growth in Nigeria especially when it is channelled into productive and relatively sustainable sectors. This finding is in line with the “profit” dimension of the Triple Bottom Line Theory which acknowledges the value of investments and economic returns but stresses that these returns should be socially and environmentally responsible. Empirically, the outcome is in line with the findings of Abubakar and Danladi (2020); Amade and Oyigebe (2024); Udoinyang et al. (2024) who submit that FDI leads to growth in Nigeria when it is combined with adequate institutional and human capital capacity. In particular, this study estimates not only FDI but also environmental and social welfare variables, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the investment and sustainability outcomes than studies focusing only on FDI growth relationships.

4.3 Impacts on Human Development, Social Welfare and Poverty

It is found that human development has a strong positive effect on economic welfare while poverty has a significant negative effect in the long run. These findings underscore the relevance of social welfare in achieving sustainable economic performance in Nigeria. The positive effect of the Human Development Index is in line with the “people” dimension of the Triple Bottom Line Theory that sees education, health, and living standards as the foundation of sustainable growth. On the other hand, poverty has a negative effect, in that widespread deprivation is a drag on productivity and economic growth. These results are consistent with the recent empirical findings of Ohioze et al. (2024) and Onicha et al. (2024) that environmental and economic conditions are directly related to human development outcomes. This paper contributes significantly to the literature by explicitly considering HDI and poverty in the long run growth model. In the long-run growth model, social welfare variables are generally regarded as outcomes instead of the fundamental determinants of economic performance.

4.4 Strength and Validity of the Model

The Dynamic OLS estimates are consistent with the sign and statistical significance of the FMOLS coefficients, which reinforces the robustness of the long-run relationships identified in this paper. The diagnostic tests also confirm the absence of serial correlation, heteroskedasticity and multicollinearity, implying the reliability and soundness of the estimated models. We perform a number of robustness checks to increase our confidence in the empirical results and to make sure that the findings are not driven by econometric weaknesses. The stability of the coefficients across estimation techniques reinforces the theoretical proposition that sustainable development outcomes emerge from persistent interactions among economic, environmental, and social factors.

4.5 Policy Implications and Contribution to the Literature Gap

The findings of this study provide practical solutions to the identified research gaps and policy challenges in Nigeria's sustainable development framework. First, by integrating environmental degradation, foreign investment, and social welfare indicators within a single long-run model, the study moves beyond the narrow economic–environmental focus of much of the existing literature. Secondly, the application of econometric analysis and review of policy documents tackles the disconnect between empirical evidence and practical sustainability strategies. Third, the results indicate that environmental protection, human development and investment policies have to be pursued jointly to achieve sustainable growth, as emphasized by both Sustainable Development Theory and Triple Bottom Line framework.

The findings are summaries in the following: Environmental degradation (GHG, CO₂, DEF) significantly reduces economic welfare, validating Sustainable Development Theory, FDI contribute positively to growth when aligned with sustainable practices, human development is a strong long-run driver of growth, supporting the “People” dimension of the Triple Bottom Line, poverty makes sustainable economic performance very difficult.

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that Nigeria can simultaneously improve economic welfare and social well-being by reducing environmental degradation, improving human development outcomes, and attracting sustainability-oriented foreign investment. The study contributes to the literature by providing an integrated and policy-relevant analysis and provides a robust empirical basis for designing more effective sustainable development strategies in Nigeria.

4.6 Qualitative Appraisal of Nigeria's Sustainable Development Policies

The qualitative survey of the major policy documents on sustainability in Nigeria shows that the country has a fairly comprehensive institutional framework for sustainable development. These include the National Climate Change Act (2021), National Adaptation Plan, Energy Transition Plan (2022), National Forest Policy, and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which collectively promote the expansion of renewable energy, climate resilience, emissions reduction, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable economic growth. These policy frameworks are mostly consistent with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 7, 8, 13 and 15). However, implementation is constrained by a comprehensive policy architecture, due to poor institutional coordination, in adequate funding, patchy policy continuity, weak monitoring systems and limited enforcement capacity. In many parts of Nigeria, compliance with environmental regulations on gas flaring, illegal logging and land use management remains weak. Despite the implementation of a number of policies, there is still a long way to go in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and damage to ecosystems.

The qualitative findings corroborate the econometric evidence in this study. While foreign direct investment has a positive effect on long-run economic welfare, sustainability outcomes are highly dependent on governance quality and institutional effectiveness. Similarly, better implementation of education, health care and poverty reduction programmes beyond policy formulation is needed to improve human development. The analysis indicates that Nigeria's major challenge is not so much in policy design as in effective implementation, coordination, financing and institutional accountability.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined sustainable development in Nigeria by integrating the dimensions of economic, environmental and social welfare in an integrated analytical framework. The empirical results show that environmental degradation proxies by greenhouse gas emissions, carbon emissions and deforestation

significantly reduce the long-run economic welfare, while foreign direct investment and improvements in human development have a positive contribution to sustainable growth. Poverty continues to be a major constraint to inclusive and sustainable development. The qualitative policy assessment further reveals that although Nigeria has established comprehensive sustainability policies through the Climate Change Act, Energy Transition Plan, National Adaptation Plan, and related frameworks, weak implementation, inadequate financing, and institutional constraints continue to limit their effectiveness. The findings strongly support Sustainable Development Theory and the Triple Bottom Line framework by showing that long-term development relies on the balance of economic prosperity, environmental protection and social well-being. Thus, sustainable development in Nigeria requires coherent policies that will simultaneously enhance environmental governance, increase renewable energy, improve human capital, reduce poverty and attract sustainability-oriented investment. In conclusion, this study contributes to the sustainable development literature by combining long-run econometric evidence with qualitative policy analysis, thus providing a more holistic understanding of Nigeria's sustainability challenges and offering practical guidance to policymakers, development partners and future researchers.

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are made for policymakers to strengthen enforcement of environmental regulations; increase investment in renewable energy; support policies in education and health that promote human development; improve forest governance and climate-smart agricultural practices; attract foreign direct investment, with a view to sustainability goals. For businesses, use green technology; establish Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting standards; support community-based sustainability initiatives. Although this study provides a comprehensive assessment of sustainable development strategies in Nigeria, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the empirical analysis is based solely on secondary data at the national level for the period 1990–2022, which may obscure significant regional variations across Nigeria's states. The second limitation is that the qualitative policy analysis relies on official policy documents and does not directly evaluate the implementation outcomes at the sub-national level. Third, due to data limitations, some variables such as institutional quality, governance effectiveness, technological innovation, and renewable energy use were not explicitly included in the econometric model.

Future research should employ panel data across Nigerian states, incorporate governance and institutional indicators, and investigate sector-specific sustainability strategies to provide more detailed policy insights.

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