

Making Nigeria Work: The Role of Trusted Leadership in Promoting Economic Growth, Sustainable Development and National Security

Abdullahi Musa, Ph.D¹*

¹Department of Political Science, Federal University of Education Kontagora, Niger State, Nigeria

Abstract: Nigeria stands at a critical point in its development trajectory. The country possesses a large population of over 200 million people, substantial natural resources, entrepreneurial citizens, a sizeable domestic market and considerable regional influence, yet these advantages have not consistently produced broad-based prosperity and security. This paper examines how trusted leadership can provide the institutional foundation for economic growth, sustainable development and national security. It adopts an analytical approach based on recent policy reports, scholarly literature and relevant development frameworks. The paper argues that trust is not merely a political virtue; it is a productive national asset that reduces uncertainty, strengthens compliance, facilitates collective action and improves the legitimacy of difficult reforms. It further argues that economic growth must be inclusive and employment-generating; sustainable development must integrate economic, social and environmental considerations; and national security must combine effective coercive capacity with justice, opportunity and community engagement. The paper identifies corruption, weak institutional accountability, policy inconsistency, poor public-sector capacity, insecurity, infrastructure deficits, human-capital gaps and social exclusion as major constraints. It proposes a governance framework built around ethical and accountable leadership, strong institutions, policy continuity, inclusive economic transformation, human-capital development, evidence-based administration, security-sector effectiveness, stronger local governance and citizen participation. The paper concludes that making Nigeria work is a long-term institutional project. Nigeria's resources can become a national dividend only when leadership consistently converts public authority into public value and development outcomes.

Keywords: Trusted Leadership, Good Governance, Economic Growth, Sustainable Development, National Security.

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*Corresponding Author:

Abdullahi Musa, Ph.D
Department of Political Science, Federal
University of Education Kontagora, Niger State,
Nigeria

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aspiration to make Nigeria work is ultimately an aspiration to build a State in which institutions perform, citizens enjoy security, businesses can invest with reasonable confidence, public resources generate visible social value, and development opportunities are broadly shared. Nigeria has many of the characteristics needed to achieve this aspiration. It has a large domestic market, extensive agricultural potential, oil and gas resources, mineral deposits, a dynamic private sector, a growing digital economy and a young population. Nevertheless, the conversion of these assets

into sustained improvements in welfare has remained uneven.

The challenge is not simply a shortage of resources. It is also a question of governance, how public authority is exercised, how priorities are selected, how resources are allocated, how institutions are held accountable and how citizens experience the state. The World Bank's April 2026 Nigeria Development Update reports meaningful progress in restoring macroeconomic stability following major reforms, but stresses that translating macroeconomic gains into better living

conditions requires faster, sustained and more inclusive growth.

This distinction is vital as a country can record improvements in aggregate economic indicators while households continue to face high living costs, weak job creation and inadequate public services. The World Bank's 2026 assessment specifically notes that poverty is projected to decline only slowly and that weak job creation will continue to constrain improvements in living standards. Thus, the quality of leadership and public administration matters because economic reforms must ultimately be transmitted into real improvements in citizens' lives.

The concept of trusted leadership provides a useful entry point. Trust is generated when leaders demonstrate competence, integrity, fairness, predictability, transparency and responsiveness. Trusted leadership does not mean that citizens agree with every government policy. Rather, it means that citizens have sufficient confidence that decisions are made through legitimate processes, that public officials can be held accountable, and that burdens and benefits are distributed according to defensible principles.

The theme of this paper links trusted leadership to three major national outcomes: economic growth, sustainable development and security. The relationship is mutually reinforcing. Effective institutions encourage investment and productivity; productive economic activity creates employment and revenue; inclusive development reduces some of the vulnerabilities that fuel instability; and security protects people, infrastructure and economic activity. Conversely, corruption, exclusion, insecurity and institutional weakness can reinforce one another.

The paper argues that trusted leadership should be treated as the coordinating principle of Nigeria's national transformation. It examines the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the argument, assesses Nigeria's major governance and development challenges, analyses the relationship between leadership and the economy, sustainability and security, and proposes practical pathways for making Nigeria work.

2.0 Conceptual and Analytical Foundations

2.1 Trusted Leadership

Trusted leadership is best understood within the broader concept of good governance. It refers to leadership that exercises public authority in a manner that is transparent, accountable, competent, ethical, fair and responsive to citizens. Trust develops when citizens believe that leaders use public power and resources for legitimate public purposes and that government decisions are predictable, lawful and oriented towards the public interest.

The World Bank (2026) current governance framework identifies governance as a critical determinant of development outcomes. Its Worldwide Governance Indicators assess governance through six dimensions: voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption. The World Bank notes that inclusive and accountable institutions are associated with stronger economic development, public-service delivery and job creation. Trusted leadership in the public sector refers to the exercise of authority in a manner that consistently earns confidence through integrity, competence, accountability, transparency, fairness and responsiveness. It involves more than personal popularity. A leader may be popular without being accountable, or technically competent without being trusted. Public trust emerges when institutions and leaders demonstrate that decisions are lawful, explainable, reasonably predictable and oriented toward public value.

For Nigeria, therefore, trusted leadership should go beyond the personal popularity of political leaders. It should be reflected in institutional integrity, transparent public procurement, responsible management of public finances, respect for the rule of law, effective service delivery, accountability for corruption and meaningful citizen participation. This is particularly important because the United Nations' World Social Report 2025 identifies declining social trust, inequality and economic insecurity as factors contributing to social fragmentation and instability. The report advocates equity, economic security and solidarity as important foundations for social progress.

For this paper, trusted leadership refers to the exercise of public authority through integrity, accountability, transparency, competence, fairness and responsiveness in ways that strengthen citizens' confidence in public institutions and promote effective governance and public welfare.

2.2 Economic Growth

Economic growth refers to a sustained increase in the real output and productive capacity of an economy. It is commonly measured by changes in real Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, contemporary development thinking increasingly recognises that GDP growth alone does not necessarily translate into improved living standards. The World Bank recent Nigeria Development 2026 reports that Nigeria has made progress in restoring macroeconomic stability, with economic growth remaining robust, but stresses that household incomes have not fully recovered and poverty remains high. It therefore calls for translating macroeconomic stability into human-capital development, productivity, economic opportunities and inclusive growth.

The African Development Bank 2026 similarly reports that Nigeria's real GDP grew by about 4% in 2025, supported by services, oil and gas, agriculture, trade and real estate, while warning that insecurity, climate change and external shocks remain risks to future growth. Economic growth is necessary, but growth must be sufficiently broad-based and inclusive to improve citizens' welfare. For this paper, Economic growth refers to a sustained expansion in the real productive capacity and output of an economy, ideally accompanied by increased productivity, investment, employment, income opportunities and improvements in living standards.

2.3 Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is broader than economic growth. The United Nations (2025) defines it as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The UN emphasises three interconnected dimensions: economic development, social inclusion and environmental protection. The 2030 Agenda further describes sustainable development as an integrated process involving people, planet and prosperity, while also stressing peace, justice and strong institutions.

Recent UN work reinforces the importance of moving beyond GDP as the sole measure of progress. In 2025, the UN Secretary-General established a High-Level Expert Group on measures that complement or go beyond GDP because GDP does not capture all dimensions of sustainable development and human well-being. The Sustainable Development Goals recognise that development objectives are interconnected. In particular, SDG 16 emphasises peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. This reinforces the argument that governance quality is not peripheral to development; it is one of its foundations.

For this paper, Sustainable development is a development process that simultaneously promotes economic prosperity, social inclusion and environmental protection while ensuring that the needs and opportunities of present generations do not undermine the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

2.4 National Security

The traditional understanding of national security focuses on protecting the sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence and institutions of the state from internal and external threats. Contemporary thinking, however, has expanded national security to include human security. This recognises that people cannot be considered secure simply because the territory of a country is protected. Food insecurity, unemployment, poverty, climate shocks, violent conflict, cyber threats, displacement and institutional fragility can also threaten people's security.

This broader approach is particularly relevant to Africa. UNDP's 2025 report, *Advancing Human Security for a Resilient and Prosperous Africa* identify converging challenges including climate shocks, food shortages, conflict, digital threats and fragile institutions. It advocates a new human-security approach centred on resilience, stability and long-term prosperity.

The UN's New Agenda for Peace recognises that contemporary peace and security threats include conflict, violence outside conventional warfare, emerging technologies, inequality and climate-related risks. For this paper, National security refers to the capacity of the state to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity, citizens, institutions and vital national interests while creating conditions of peace, stability and human security necessary for citizens to live safely and pursue productive livelihoods.

3.1 Theoretical Perspective: Institutional Theory and the Social Contract

The paper is anchored primarily on institutional theory and complemented by the social-contract perspective. Institutional theory emphasises that development outcomes are strongly influenced by the rules, norms and organisations that structure human behaviour. Formal laws are important, but informal practices, incentives and expectations also shape how institutions operate. Where institutions reward competence, accountability and long-term performance, leaders and public servants have incentives to pursue public value. Where patronage and impunity are rewarded, formal rules can be undermined by informal practices.

The social-contract perspective adds the relationship between citizens and the state. Government exercises authority partly because citizens accept its legitimacy and expect protection, justice and public goods in return. Trust is strengthened when the state delivers these functions fairly and transparently. It is weakened when citizens perceive that public authority is captured for private or sectional interests.

These perspectives provide a useful explanation of why trusted leadership matters to economic and security outcomes. Strong institutions reduce uncertainty and transaction costs, support credible policy commitments and create channels for peaceful conflict resolution. Conversely, institutional weakness can increase opportunities for corruption, rent seeking, insecurity and policy instability.

The analytical framework developed in this paper can be summarised as follows: trusted leadership promotes institutional credibility; institutional credibility supports effective public administration; effective administration creates a better environment for inclusive

economic growth and sustainable development; and inclusive development combined with effective security institutions strengthens national stability. The relationship is cyclical because improved development and security can in turn reinforce public trust.

4 Nigeria's Governance and Development Context

Nigeria's governance environment combines important democratic and institutional achievements with persistent implementation challenges. The country has constitutional institutions, elected governments, professional civil services, courts, oversight bodies, universities, private-sector organisations and civil-society groups. The central issue is therefore not the complete absence of institutions, but the extent to which institutions operate consistently, independently and effectively.

Corruption is one important indicator of the trust challenge. Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index places Nigeria at 26 out of 100 and 142nd among 182 countries. The index measures perceptions of public-sector corruption, and the result indicates continuing concerns about corruption and accountability.

Corruption affects development through several channels. It can raise the cost of public projects, distort procurement, weaken regulatory enforcement, divert resources, reduce the quality of services and create unequal access to opportunities. It also damages the credibility of government reforms because citizens may interpret policy decisions through the lens of suspected private interests.

At the same time, Nigeria should not be presented only through its problems. There are important opportunities. The World Bank's recent assessment identifies progress in macroeconomic stabilisation and notes that reforms have created a foundation for deeper structural change, including improved public-service delivery, infrastructure and private-sector-led growth if the gains are sustained. The policy implication is that Nigeria needs to move from reform announcements to implementation systems. The test of leadership should increasingly be whether policies are implemented effectively, whether public services improve, whether citizens experience greater security and whether economic opportunities expand.

5.1 Trusted Leadership and Economic Growth

The following should be considered:

1. Policy Credibility and the Investment Environment

Economic actors make decisions partly on the basis of expectations about the future. Investors require confidence that taxes, regulations, property rights, contracts and macroeconomic policies will not change unpredictably. Trusted leadership improves the

credibility of public commitments by making policy more transparent and institutions more predictable.

Nigeria's recent macroeconomic reforms demonstrate both the difficulty and necessity of credible policy. Stabilisation measures can impose short-term costs while creating conditions for longer-term growth. For such reforms to remain politically and socially sustainable, government must communicate clearly, protect vulnerable households where necessary and demonstrate responsible management of public resources.

2. Diversification and Productive Transformation

Nigeria's long-term growth strategy should reduce excessive vulnerability to commodity cycles and increase value addition across agriculture, manufacturing, services and digital sectors. Agriculture can create large-scale employment if supported by irrigation, storage, rural roads, extension, processing and market access. Manufacturing requires dependable electricity, logistics, finance, skills and predictable regulation. Digital services require broadband, digital skills, cybersecurity and innovation ecosystems.

Trusted leadership contributes by maintaining a stable policy environment and ensuring that incentives are transparent. Government should avoid creating an economy in which access to opportunities depends primarily on political connections. Competitive neutrality and transparent rules encourage entrepreneurship and productivity.

3. Small and Medium Enterprises

SMEs are central to employment and local economic activity. Yet entrepreneurs often face multiple taxes and charges, infrastructure deficiencies, limited access to finance and regulatory uncertainty. A trusted administration should simplify procedures, digitise services where appropriate, reduce opportunities for rent seeking and provide clear information about regulatory requirements.

4. Human Capital as an Economic Strategy

Human capital should be treated as productive infrastructure. Education, health, technical training and digital skills increase the capacity of citizens to participate in modern economic activity. The World Bank's 2026 Nigeria Development Update places strong emphasis on early childhood development and human capital as foundations for long-term productivity.

A leadership agenda focused on economic growth should therefore measure success not only by GDP but also by employment, labour productivity, school completion, learning outcomes, health indicators, household purchasing power and access to basic services.

6.1 Trusted Leadership and Sustainable Development

1. Integrating Economic, Social and Environmental Priorities

Sustainable development requires coordination across policy sectors. Economic projects can create jobs but also produce environmental costs; infrastructure can improve connectivity but can displace communities; energy development can increase production but can also generate environmental risks. Trusted leadership requires transparent trade-offs and mechanisms through which affected citizens can participate.

2. Climate Resilience and Food Security

Climate variability can affect agriculture, water availability, food prices and livelihoods. These effects can also interact with migration and local conflict. Sustainable development should therefore include climate-smart agriculture, water management, renewable energy, resilient infrastructure and environmental restoration.

Food security deserves special attention because it connects the economic, social and security dimensions of national development. Productive agriculture increases incomes and reduces dependence on food imports, while stable food supplies reduce household vulnerability. Leadership should therefore integrate agricultural policy with infrastructure, finance, security, storage and market systems.

3. Intergenerational Responsibility

Sustainable leadership considers the consequences of today's decisions for future generations. Public borrowing, natural-resource extraction, environmental degradation and infrastructure choices should be assessed against long-term national interests. This requires stronger planning institutions, monitoring and evaluation, credible data and continuity across political administrations.

7.1 Trusted Leadership and National Security

1. Security as a Development Condition

Insecurity has direct economic consequences. It can prevent farmers from accessing land, disrupt markets, destroy assets, discourage investment and increase the cost of transportation and insurance. Displacement can also place pressure on host communities and public services. Security is therefore not a separate sectoral concern; it is a condition for economic and social development.

The United Nations has repeatedly emphasised the connection between peacebuilding, development and institutional capacity. Its work on peace and security highlights the importance of coordinated action across governments, international organisations and other actors in addressing complex conflicts.

2. Professional and Accountable Security Institutions

Nigeria needs security institutions with adequate resources, professional training, intelligence capacity, inter-agency coordination and clear accountability. Effectiveness and accountability should not be treated as competing objectives. Security agencies that operate lawfully and professionally can build public cooperation, while abuses can undermine intelligence gathering and legitimacy.

3. Addressing the Drivers of Insecurity

Military and policing responses are necessary in circumstances involving armed violence, but they cannot by themselves address all drivers of insecurity. Government must also address unemployment, poverty, weak justice systems, illicit economies, community grievances and institutional exclusion. Prevention is less costly than repeated emergency responses.

Community engagement is particularly important. Citizens often possess information about emerging threats, but they will share information when they trust the institutions receiving it. Local government, traditional institutions, civil society and community organisations can therefore complement formal security structures.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS IN MAKING NIGERIA WORK

Public administration is the machinery through which political decisions become programmes, services and regulatory actions. Consequently, leadership reforms that do not strengthen administrative systems may produce limited results. Nigeria requires a professional public service that is politically responsive but administratively competent and ethically grounded.

First, recruitment and promotion should increasingly reflect competence, merit and performance. Second, ministries, departments and agencies need clear service standards and measurable targets. Third, monitoring and evaluation should become routine rather than an activity undertaken mainly for donor or project reporting. Fourth, digital government should be used to reduce transaction costs, improve records and limit opportunities for petty corruption.

Fifth, intergovernmental coordination must improve. Many services are delivered through federal, state and local institutions, and weak coordination can produce duplication or gaps. Stronger local governance is especially important because citizens experience government most directly at the community level.

Finally, public administration should become more citizen-centred. Feedback mechanisms, grievance systems, open data and service charters can help government identify implementation failures and rebuild confidence.

MAJOR CHALLENGES TO MAKING NIGERIA WORK

Report from world bank and UNDP (2025) highlights the following as the major challenges to making Nigeria work:

1 Corruption and Rent Seeking

Persistent corruption undermines public trust and weakens the effectiveness of public expenditure. Anti-corruption policy should therefore move beyond episodic enforcement towards prevention, procurement transparency, institutional controls, asset recovery and consistent sanctions.

2 Policy Inconsistency

Frequent policy changes can discourage investment and weaken implementation. Long-term national priorities should be supported by legislation, institutional ownership, measurable targets and broad stakeholder consensus.

3 Weak Institutional Capacity

Even good policies fail when implementing institutions lack personnel, data, systems, funding or managerial capacity. Capacity building should focus on organisational systems and incentives, not training alone.

4 Inequality and Social Exclusion

When citizens perceive those opportunities are distributed unfairly, social cohesion can weaken. Development policy should therefore focus on inclusion across regions, genders, socioeconomic groups and generations.

5 Insecurity

Persistent violence increases development costs and reduces citizens' confidence. Security policy needs prevention, professional enforcement, justice and socioeconomic interventions.

6 Infrastructure and Energy Constraints

Unreliable electricity, transport bottlenecks and inadequate water and digital infrastructure raise the cost of doing business and delivering public services. Infrastructure planning should prioritise productivity, resilience and value for money.

7 Weak Policy Continuity

Long-term development requires continuity beyond electoral cycles. Successive administrations should preserve effective programmes while modifying them through evidence rather than abandoning them solely because they were initiated by predecessors.

CONCLUSION

Making Nigeria work requires a shift from a narrow conception of leadership as the exercise of political authority towards a broader conception of

leadership as the responsible production of public value. The central argument of this paper is that trusted leadership is the foundation connecting economic growth, sustainable development and national security. Without trust, difficult reforms can lose legitimacy; without capable institutions, sound policies can fail in implementation; without inclusive growth, economic expansion may not translate into improved welfare; and without security, development gains remain vulnerable.

Nigeria's recent macroeconomic progress provides an important platform. The World Bank reports that reforms have strengthened macroeconomic stability and created opportunities for deeper structural transformation, but emphasises that the gains must reach households through inclusive growth and better living conditions. This should be understood as a governance challenge as much as an economic one.

The persistent corruption challenge also demonstrates why leadership must be supported by strong institutions. Nigeria's 2025 CPI score of 26/100 and ranking of 142 out of 182 countries underline the continuing need for credible accountability and integrity reforms.

Ultimately, making Nigeria work is not a short-term project. It requires a durable national compact in which leaders accept accountability, public servants pursue professional standards, citizens participate constructively, businesses invest productively and institutions enforce rules fairly. If Nigeria can institutionalise these principles, its population, resources, entrepreneurial capacity and strategic position can become foundations for prosperity rather than sources of unrealised potential. The convergence of these four principles offers Nigeria a realistic pathway towards a more capable state, a more productive economy, a safer society and a more sustainable future.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are advanced for policymakers, administrators and other stakeholders:

1. Leadership development programmes at Federal, State and Local levels should emphasise ethical decision-making, strategic management, public accountability, evidence use and citizen-centred governance.
2. Government should strengthen transparency in procurement, budgeting and project implementation, with accessible reporting that allows citizens and oversight institutions to track major public expenditures.
3. Public-sector reform should focus on measurable service outcomes and institutional performance rather than relying mainly on structural reorganisation.

4. Economic reforms should be accompanied by targeted measures that support poor and vulnerable households, improve job creation and expand access to productive opportunities.
5. Government at all levels should prioritise infrastructure investments that reduce the cost of production and improve access to markets, energy, water, transport and digital connectivity.
6. Human-capital development should receive sustained and protected investment, especially in foundational education, health and employable skills.
7. Security policy should integrate professional enforcement with prevention, justice, community intelligence, conflict resolution and livelihood support.
8. Local governments in the country should be strengthened with appropriate administrative capacity, financial accountability and mechanisms for citizen participation.
9. National development priorities should be supported by reliable monitoring and evaluation systems so that ineffective interventions can be revised or discontinued on the basis of evidence.
10. Citizens, professional associations, universities, civil society and the private sector should be treated as partners in national development rather than merely as recipients or critics of government policy.

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