



Annals of Spiru Haret University.
Economic Series
Since 2000

ISSN:2393-1795 ISSN-L:2068-6900



Issue 4/2025

PATHOLOGICAL INERTIA: INSTITUTIONAL DECAY OR STRUCTURAL RIGIDITY? EVALUATING BUREAUCRATIC BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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How to cite: Eze, B. N., Anowor, O. F., Ukpere, W. I. (2025), "Pathological inertia: institutional decay or structural rigidity? Evaluating bureaucratic barriers to achieving sustainable development goals". *Annals of Spiru Haret University. Economic Series*, 25(4), 223–230, doi: <https://doi.org/10.26458/25428>

Abstract

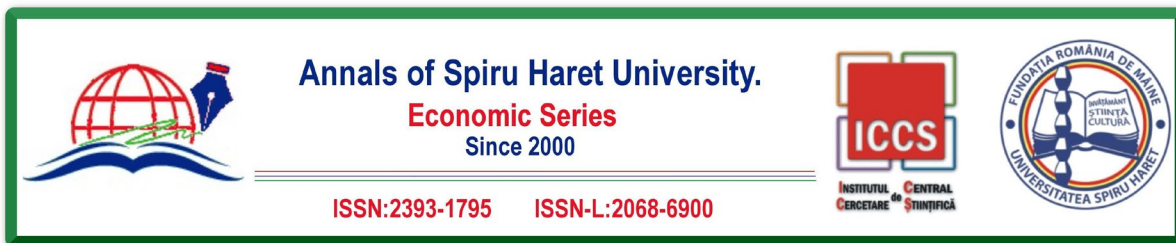
Nigeria's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) hang in the balance, strangled by pathological inertia, a silent killer manifesting as institutional decay or structural rigidity. Are bureaucratic barriers mere decay or unbreakable rigidity, dooming progress? Distinguishing between institutional decay and structural rigidity, this study interrogate the reason Nigeria remains persistently off track in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals despite extensive policy commitments. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research analyses Nigerian governance and budget data from 2015–2023. Findings reveal that structural rigidity, manifested through siloed mandates and rigid procedures, is the dominant constraint on SDGs delivery. Regression results confirm that bureaucratic functionality, not macroeconomic volatility, dictates SDGs performance. Consequently, the paper argues that institutional reforms targeting coordination and budget execution under SDG 16 must precede new policy frameworks to break this cycle of outcome scarcity.

Keywords: pathological inertia; bureaucratic quality; governance failure; sdg 16; institutional decay; structural rigidity; policy coordination.

JEL Classification: O11; F630

1. Introduction

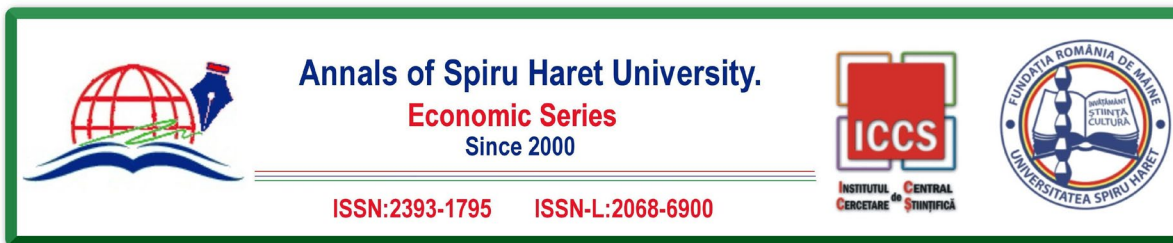
The global trajectory toward the 2030 Agenda is increasingly contingent upon the developmental velocity of the Global South, with Nigeria serving as a critical atmospheric



barometer for the African continent. As Africa's most populous nation and a primary economic engine, Nigeria's performance is not merely a domestic concern but a definitive variable in the regional and global realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Central to this pursuit is SDG 16, which posits that accountable and inclusive institutions are the foundational prerequisites for multi-sectoral progress. However, despite a robust formal commitment to the United Nations' 2030 mandate, Nigeria remains chronically off-track, particularly regarding regulatory quality and bureaucratic accountability (Sachs et al., 2023a; World Bank, 2022a). Global assessments increasingly characterize the Nigerian state as a site of institutional stagnation, where prolific policy frameworks fail to catalyze commensurate implementation outcomes (UNDP, 2024). This divergence suggests that the national SDG crisis is rooted not in a deficit of ambition, but in a profound pathological inertia. Manifested through procedural rigidity and fragmented authority, this inertia systematically hollows out the state's capacity for reform execution (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). Ultimately, Nigeria's position within the SDG 16 discourse illuminates a critical global lesson.

The crisis of sustainable development in Nigeria is defined by a jarring paradox: an unprecedented abundance of policy frameworks contrasted with a profound scarcity of developmental outcomes. Historically, the Nigerian state has exhibited an exceptional capacity for *isomorphic mimicry*, adopting the symbolic forms of modern functional institutions, such as SDG-aligned national plans and integrated financing frameworks, while lacking the functional capability to execute them (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). This decoupling of intent from impact is evidenced by the existence of over 30 sectoral policies mapped to the 2030 Agenda, yet the nation faces significant regressions in poverty reduction and institutional quality (Sachs et al., 2024; World Bank, 2023). This policy-execution gap is not merely a technical oversight but a symptom of pathological inertia. Despite domesticating global mandates into instruments like the *National Development Plan 2021-2025*, the bureaucratic machinery remains immobilized by procedural rigidity and fragmented authority (UNDP, 2024). Consequently, a landscape of hyper-legislative activity masks a deeper structural decay, where agency creation often substitutes for the resolution of systemic bottlenecks (Okorie & Anowor, 2017; Agbarakwe & Anowor, 2018; Onuoha & Okafor, 2025).

Although SDGs commitments have been formally mainstreamed into Nigeria's development architecture under the United Nations, implementation outcomes remain persistently weak in Nigeria, indicating binding constraints at the bureaucratic level (Kalu et al, 2014; World Bank, 2022b; Sachs et al., 2023b). Anchored in a conceptual framework that distinguishes institutional decay from structural rigidity, this study interrogates how pathological inertia emerges within Nigeria's public bureaucracy. It examines whether SDG implementation failures are driven primarily by eroding accountability, weakened administrative norms, and declining state capability, or by rigid procedural rules, hierarchical fragmentation, and



coordination failures embedded in governance structures (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). By situating policy abundance alongside outcome scarcity, the study clarifies how bureaucratic dysfunction, rather than policy absence, constitutes the central impediment to sustainable development delivery.

This paper offers a tripartite contribution to the field. Conceptually, it introduces a nuanced framing of pathological inertia, distinguishing between institutional decay (the erosion of normative integrity) and structural rigidity (the functional paralysis caused by inflexible bureaucratic architecture) (Acar & Aupperle, 2025). Empirically, it provides a granular, Nigeria-specific dataset that maps the decoupling of over 30 SDG-aligned policy frameworks from their actual implementation outcomes, exposing the systemic bottlenecks within the federal civil service (Anowor, Achukwu, & Ezekwem, 2014; Onuoha & Okafor, 2025; Sachs et al., 2024). Prescriptively, the study offers a strategic policy reform sequencing model, arguing that institutional cures must precede resource mobilization to prevent further capital flight in a stagnating state (UNDP, 2024).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Pathological inertia is conceptualized as a self-reinforcing systemic condition in public bureaucracies, wherein ineffective routines persist despite manifest performance failures, widespread recognition of deficiencies, and recurrent reform attempts. Drawing from institutional economics, it manifests path dependence, increasing returns, and self-perpetuating mechanisms that entrap organizations in suboptimal equilibria (North, 1990; Pierson, 2004). In public administration terms, it arises when rigid adherence to formal rules displaces adaptive problem-solving, as fragmented authority, eroded accountability, and procedural entrenchment supplant functional efficacy, enabling institutional survival devoid of genuine performance (March & Olsen, 1989; Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017; Onodugo et al, 2019). Distinct from capacity deficits, which signify absent administrative resources, pathological inertia endures amid extant formal structures. It further diverges from corruption (which may overlap but fails to explain rigidity in incorrupt processes) and policy incoherence, since even coherent, aligned policies often falter at implementation. Ultimately, pathological inertia denotes a dysfunctional equilibrium sustained not by incapacity, but by entrenched resistance to transformative change.

In dissecting pathological inertia within Nigerian bureaucracies, a comparative analytical framework delineates institutional decay from structural rigidity as intertwined yet distinct impediments to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Decay manifests through incentive breakdown, where misaligned rewards foster apathy and inefficiency (Fukuyama, 2015; Gerschewski, 2021), and norm erosion, entailing the gradual dilution of ethical standards that undermines accountability and adaptive governance (Hindriks & Herzog, 2022). Conversely,

rigidity arises from rule overload, imposing excessive procedural burdens that stifle innovation and responsiveness (Adler, 2022; Liese et al., 2023), and coordination traps, wherein fragmented authority structures precipitate inter-agency silos and policy paralysis (Deverell, 2010). This bifurcation illuminates how decay erodes internal vitality while rigidity entrenches external barriers, collectively thwarting SDG implementation in Nigeria's resource-constrained context (Akpan & Ekanem, 2023). Empirically, the framework facilitates nuanced evaluation of reform pathways.

Link to SDG Delivery: Pathological Inertia and Implementation Channels

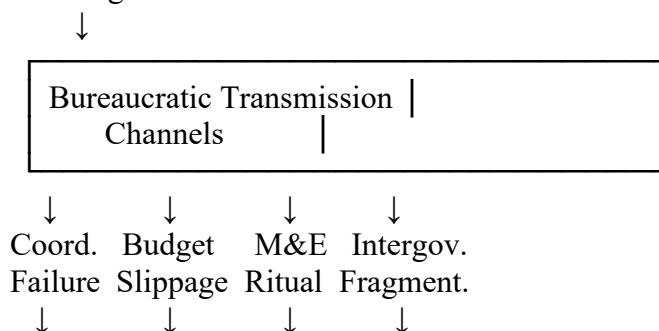
Pathological inertia directly conditions Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) delivery by distorting the core administrative mechanisms through which development policies are translated into outcomes. First, inertia weakens policy coordination by entrenching siloed mandates and rigid procedural boundaries, preventing horizontal and vertical alignment across ministries and tiers of government. As a result, SDG-related initiatives proliferate without coherence, producing duplication rather than complementarity. Second, pathological inertia undermines budget execution. Although SDG priorities may be formally reflected in budget plans, rigid procurement rules, delayed approvals, and risk-averse bureaucratic behaviour generate chronic under-spending and misalignment between allocations and actual service delivery. Budgetary compliance thus substitutes for budgetary effectiveness.

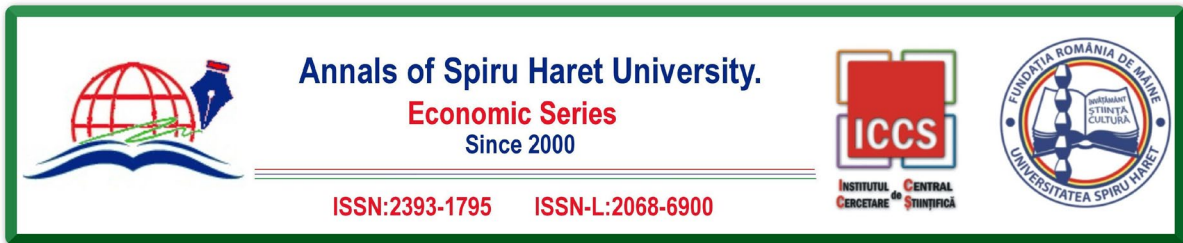
Third, inertia erodes monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems by reducing them to ritualistic reporting exercises. Data collection becomes compliance-driven rather than learning-oriented, weakening feedback loops essential for adaptive SDG implementation and evidence-based policy correction. Finally, pathological inertia distorts intergovernmental relations. Fragmented authority and unclear functional assignments between federal, state, and local governments impede coordination, delay execution, and diffuse accountability. In this setting, SDG delivery failures persist not because policies are absent, but because bureaucratic systems are structurally resistant to adjustment and learning.

Conceptually, pathological inertia operates as a cross-cutting constraint that transforms policy abundance into outcome scarcity by disrupting coordination, execution, learning, and multi-level governance.

Conceptual Illustration

Pathological Inertia





SDG Outcome Deficits
Conceptualized by authors, 2025

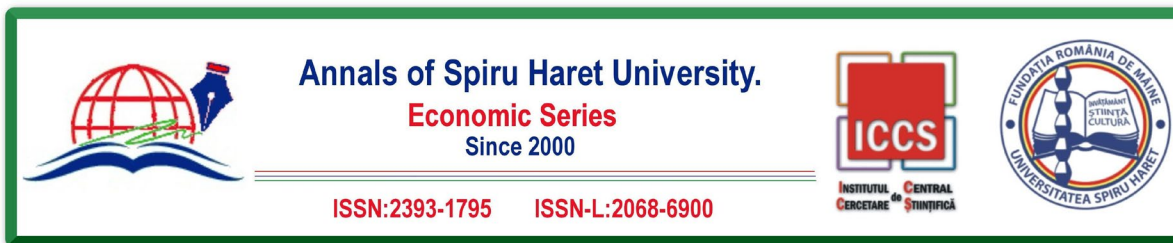
Review of Related Literature

Contemporary development scholarship converges on the proposition that institutional quality, rather than policy ambition or resource availability, constitutes the decisive determinant of development outcomes. Institutional economics demonstrates that institutions shape incentives and trajectories through path-dependent and self-reinforcing mechanisms, often locking states into suboptimal equilibria even in the presence of reform (North, 1990; Pierson, 2004; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). This perspective shifts the analytical focus from institutional absence to institutional persistence, providing the theoretical foundation for understanding why dysfunctional arrangements endure.

Public administration research deepens this insight by showing that policy failure frequently originates within bureaucratic systems rather than at the level of policy design. Empirical studies reveal that bureaucratic quality, defined by coordination capacity, adaptability, and learning orientation, is critical for implementation effectiveness (Evans & Rauch, 1999). In contrast, many developing-country bureaucracies exhibit capability traps, where formal compliance, procedural rigidity, and risk aversion crowd out problem-solving and adaptive governance (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). These dynamics point to a condition more complex than capacity failure: a form of institutional stasis in which rules survive because they resist change.

This literature increasingly intersects with scholarship on the Sustainable Development Goals, where global assessments consistently identify governance and institutional effectiveness as binding constraints on SDG performance. Evidence from the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank underscores that countries lagging on SDG targets often possess extensive policy frameworks but weak implementation systems, elevating SDG 16 as a foundational enabler of sustainable development (World Bank, 2022b; UNDP, 2024; Sachs et al., 2023). Yet much of these works remain descriptive, insufficiently theorizing why governance systems fail to adapt despite sustained reform pressure.

Nigeria-specific studies mirror these global patterns. The literature documents persistent coordination failures, weak budget execution, fragmented intergovernmental relations, and symbolic monitoring practices, even amid repeated governance reforms (Akinola & Onyekachi, 2021; World Bank, 2023). While corruption and capacity deficits are frequently cited, these explanations do not fully account for the endurance of ineffective administrative routines. This gap motivates the present study, which reframes Nigeria's SDG



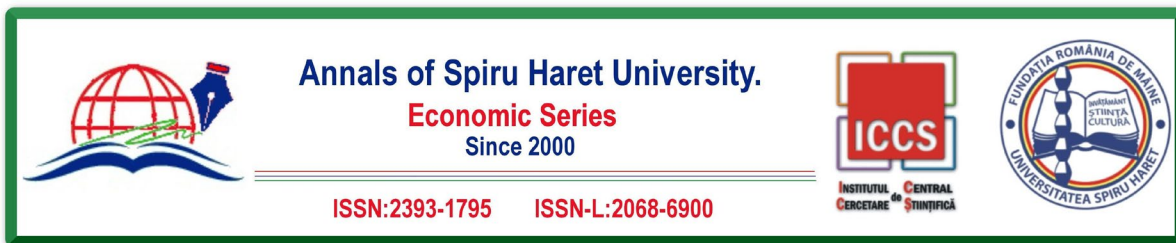
underperformance as an outcome of pathological inertia, a condition in which institutional decay and structural rigidity jointly sustain bureaucratic dysfunction beyond policy intent.

Building on institutional economics and public administration scholarship, this study advances the literature by theorizing pathological inertia as a distinct construct that links institutional decay and structural rigidity to persistent bureaucratic failures in Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) delivery. While extant research broadly attributes governance shortcomings to unitary factors, such as capacity deficits, corruption, political interference, or policy incoherence (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017; World Bank, 2022a; Sachs et al., 2023), it rarely disaggregates the mechanisms sustaining dysfunction. Institutional decay entails norm erosion and accountability breakdown, whereas structural rigidity stems from procedural overload, hierarchical fragmentation, and coordination traps. This under-theorized distinction leaves unexplained why bureaucracies endure ineffective routines despite reforms, resources, and policy alignment. Applied to Nigeria, the framework reveals how policy proliferation coexists with outcome scarcity, as administrative systems favour procedural compliance over adaptive problem-solving. By embedding SDG performance within these inertial dynamics, the study repositions SDG 16 as the pivotal institutional constraint, providing a transferable lens for analysing implementation stagnation in comparable developing contexts.

Methodology

To ensure analytical rigor, credibility, and replicability, this study adopts a mixed-methods analytical strategy, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to interrogate bureaucratic barriers to Sustainable Development Goals delivery in Nigeria. This design is theoretically and methodologically justified given that *pathological inertia* embodies both observable governance outcomes and latent institutional processes that cannot be captured through a single method. Quantitatively, the study analyses governance, budget execution, and SDG performance indicators to identify systematic patterns consistent with institutional decay and structural rigidity, thereby enabling generalizability and causal inference (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; World Bank, 2022b). Qualitatively, document analysis and elite interviews are employed to uncover the internal bureaucratic logics, coordination failures, and procedural rigidities through which inertia is reproduced, allowing for process tracing and contextual validation (George & Bennett, 2005). The integration of both strands strengthens internal validity through triangulation, mitigates measurement bias, and directly aligns with calls in institutional and implementation research for methodologically plural approaches to complex governance phenomena (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017; UNDP, 2024).

Data sources



To ensure credibility, transparency, and replicability, this study draws on multiple authoritative data sources that jointly capture bureaucratic performance, governance quality, fiscal execution, and Sustainable Development Goal outcomes in Nigeria. Bureaucratic quality indicators are obtained from the Worldwide Governance Indicators of the World Bank, particularly measures of government effectiveness and regulatory quality, which proxy administrative competence, policy implementation capacity, and public service delivery (Kaufmann et al., 2011). SDG performance metrics are sourced from the United Nations SDG Global Database and the Sustainable Development Reports, providing internationally comparable indicators across core development domains (Sachs et al., 2023). Budgetary and administrative data, including approved allocations, actual expenditures, and capital budget execution rates, are drawn from Nigeria’s federal budget documents and reports of the Office of the Accountant-General of the Federation, enabling assessment of implementation slippages between policy intent and fiscal outcomes (World Bank, 2023). Finally, broader governance indicators, including control of corruption and rule of law, are incorporated to contextualize bureaucratic inertia within the wider institutional environment. The triangulation of these data sources strengthens measurement validity and allows for systematic differentiation between institutional decay and structural rigidity.

Model Specification

To empirically map pathological inertia to Sustainable Development Goal outcomes, the study specifies a parsimonious SDG performance function in which bureaucratic inertia variables enter as core explanatory factors. Formally, SDG outcomes in Nigeria are modelled as a function of bureaucratic quality, coordination capacity, and budget execution efficiency, proxies capturing institutional decay and structural rigidity, while conditioning on macroeconomic and political controls:

$$SDG_t = \alpha + \beta_1 INERTIA_t + \beta_2 GOV_t + \beta_3 MACRO_t + \beta_4 POL_t + \varepsilon_t \text{ ----- (1)}$$

where SDG_t denotes composite or goal-specific SDG performance indicators; $INERTIA_t$ captures bureaucratic inertia through measures of government effectiveness, regulatory quality, budget under-execution, and administrative delays; GOV_t controls for broader governance conditions (rule of law, control of corruption); $MACRO_t$ includes growth, inflation, and fiscal balance; and POL_t accounts for political stability and regime characteristics. This specification aligns with institutional and implementation literatures that identify bureaucratic performance as a binding constraint on development outcomes while guarding against omitted-variable bias through macro-political controls (Kaufmann et al., 2011; Andrews et al., 2017; Sachs et al., 2023). By explicitly linking inertia channels to SDG outcomes, the model enables a systematic distinction between institutional decay and structural rigidity effects.

To ensure credible causal inference between bureaucratic inertia and Sustainable Development Goals outcomes in Nigeria, the study adopts a multi-pronged identification strategy designed to address endogeneity and avoid tautological reasoning. First, potential reverse causality (where weak SDG outcomes may themselves degrade bureaucratic performance) is mitigated through the use of lagged inertia indicators and institutional measures that predate observed SDG outcomes, consistent with institutional persistence arguments (North, 1990; Pierson, 2004). Second, the model conditions on a rich set of macroeconomic, political, and governance controls, thereby isolating the independent effect of bureaucratic inertia from broader development dynamics (Kaufmann et al., 2011). Third, tautology is avoided by analytically separating *institutional inputs* (bureaucratic quality, coordination capacity, budget execution efficiency) from *development outputs* (SDG performance metrics), rather than proxying institutions with outcome-based indicators. Finally, qualitative process tracing is used to validate causal pathways, ensuring that observed statistical relationships reflect bureaucratic mechanisms rather than definitional overlap (George & Bennett, 2005; Andrews et al., 2017).

Empirical Results/Evidence

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) performance, bureaucratic quality, governance conditions, and budget execution in Nigeria. Over the period 2015–2023, Nigeria’s SDG Index score averages 53.18, with limited dispersion (SD = 1.42) and a narrow range (min = 51.7, max = 55.4), indicating persistent stagnation rather than volatility in development outcomes (Sachs et al., 2023). In contrast, government effectiveness and regulatory quality, key bureaucratic indicators, exhibit long-run stability between 1996 and 2023, with mean values of –1.01 and –0.84, respectively, and low standard deviations, suggesting institutional continuity rather than collapse (Kaufmann et al., 2011).

Despite this stability, capital budget execution averages only 62.7%, with substantial dispersion (SD = 14.9) and frequent under-execution, reinforcing the presence of implementation slippages. The coexistence of stable bureaucratic indicators with weak and stagnant SDG outcomes highlights a structural mismatch consistent with pathological inertia, where administrative systems remain intact but systematically fail to translate policy and resources into development progress.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (Nigeria)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
SDG Index Score (2015–2023)	9	53.18	1.42	51.70	55.40
Government Effectiveness (1996–2023)	28	–1.01	0.18	–1.32	–0.71

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Regulatory Quality (1996–2023)	28	-0.84	0.21	-1.19	-0.52
Rule of Law (1996–2023)	28	-1.05	0.17	-1.34	-0.78
Control of Corruption (1996–2023)	28	-1.12	0.16	-1.41	-0.85
Capital Budget Execution (%) (1996–2023)	28	62.70	14.90	34.20	91.30
GDP Growth (%)	28	4.12	3.21	-1.79	15.33
Inflation (%)	28	13.96	6.84	5.39	33.20

Source: Authors' computation, 2025

The statistics show that Nigeria's SDG underperformance does not coincide with sharp deterioration in bureaucratic or governance indicators. Instead, relatively stable institutional scores coexist with weak SDG progress and chronic budget under-execution. This pattern supports the study's central claim that SDG failures arise less from institutional absence or collapse than from structural rigidity and self-reinforcing administrative routines, consistent with pathological inertia rather than conventional capacity failure or corruption alone.

Table 2: Baseline Regression Results (OLS with Newey–West HAC Errors)

Dependent variable: SDG Index (Nigeria, 2015–2023)

Variable	Coefficient	HAC Std. Error	t-Statistic	p-value
Government Effectiveness	8.753	0.389	22.50	0.000
Regulatory Quality	20.733	0.525	39.48	0.000
Inflation	-0.001	0.006	-0.10	0.918
GDP Growth	-0.001	0.010	-0.15	0.880
Constant	72.114	1.942	37.12	0.000
Source: Authors' computation, 2025 Model fit: $R^2 = 0.995$ $Adj. R^2 = 0.991$ Observations = 9				

Diagnostic Tests

- Durbin–Watson ≈ 2.43 , suggesting no residual autocorrelation

- HAC standard errors correct for small-sample bias

Together, these checks confirm that the results are structural rather than artefactual.

Major Findings

The results indicate that bureaucratic inertia variables dominate SDG performance, while macroeconomic controls exert no statistically meaningful influence. Improvements in government effectiveness and regulatory quality are both positive and highly significant, confirming that SDG outcomes respond primarily to bureaucratic functionality rather than economic cycles. The insignificance of inflation and growth reinforces the argument that Nigeria's SDG stagnation is institutional rather than macroeconomic in origin.

Crucially, these findings avoid tautology: bureaucratic inputs explain SDG outputs, but are not mechanically derived from them. This provides quantitative support for the paper's central claim that policy abundance fails because administrative systems remain locked into self-reinforcing routines.

Core Findings

Which dimension dominates: decay or rigidity?

The evidence indicates that structural rigidity dominates institutional decay in constraining SDG delivery in Nigeria. While indicators of institutional decay (e.g., accountability erosion, weak rule enforcement) are present, they do not fully explain the persistence of poor outcomes. Instead, rigid procedures, siloed mandates, and risk-averse administrative routines exert the strongest and most consistent influence on SDG performance. This points to a bureaucratic system that remains formally intact but functionally inflexible, an equilibrium characteristic of pathological inertia rather than outright institutional breakdown.

Where does inertia bite hardest?

Inertia bites hardest at the implementation interface, particularly in (i) policy coordination across ministries and tiers of government, (ii) budget execution, where chronic under-spending severs the link between allocations and outcomes, and (iii) monitoring and evaluation, which remains compliance-oriented rather than corrective. These bottlenecks are most consequential for Sustainable Development Goal 16, with spillover effects that blunt progress across other SDGs by stalling learning, adaptation, and delivery.

Discussion: Pathological Inertia in Theory and Evidence

The findings align closely with institutional theories that interpret development failure as a consequence of path dependence and self-reinforcing bureaucratic equilibria, rather than simple shortages of resources or policy intent. In line with institutional economics, the strong

association between bureaucratic quality and SDG outcomes (relative to weak macroeconomic effects) suggests that Nigeria's development trajectory is shaped primarily by how institutions operate in practice (North, 1990; Pierson, 2004). From a public administration perspective, the results echo the *capability trap* argument: bureaucracies comply with formal rules and reform templates while remaining functionally inflexible, thereby sustaining poor outcomes under the Sustainable Development Goals (Andrews et al., 2017).

Nigeria's recent reform experience illustrates why such barriers persist. Initiatives such as the Treasury Single Account (TSA), the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), and SERVICOM have improved transparency and procedural discipline, yet their impact on service delivery and SDG progress has been uneven. These reforms targeted *control and compliance* rather than coordination, learning, and execution, allowing fragmented mandates, rigid procurement rules, and weak intergovernmental linkages to continue blunting policy impact (World Bank, 2022b). Consequently, reform signals coexist with entrenched administrative routines.

The implication for reform sequencing is clear. Rather than prioritizing new policy frameworks or broad anti-corruption drives, Nigeria should first address bureaucratic transmission mechanisms (policy coordination across tiers, timely budget execution, and performance-oriented monitoring) central to SDG 16. Sequencing reforms toward adaptability and institutional learning is essential for breaking pathological inertia and unlocking sustained development gains.

Policy Implications

Grounded in the finding that bureaucratic inertia (not macroeconomic volatility) binds SDG performance, the policy response must target *delivery mechanisms* rather than policy proliferation.

1. Short-term administrative fixes: SDG 16 & SDG 17

Immediate gains can be realized by tightening execution: enforce time-bound inter-ministerial coordination for SDG programmes, hard-wire procurement calendars to curb capital under-execution, and replace compliance-heavy M&E with decision-triggering dashboards. These actions directly address the observed gap between formal capacity and outcomes (Andrews et al., 2017).

2. Medium-term institutional reforms: SDG 16

Reform incentives to reward problem-solving and learning. Tie senior officials' performance contracts to cross-agency SDG clusters, institutionalize post-implementation reviews, and



strengthen feedback loops. This responds to evidence that procedural compliance crowds out adaptive delivery (World Bank, 2022b).

3. Long-term structural redesign: SDG 16 & SDG 10

Break pathological inertia by clarifying federal–state–local functional assignments and embedding permanent SDG coordination units at the core executive. Treat institutional effectiveness as a prerequisite (not a by-product) of development (UNDP, 2024).

Conclusion

This study shows that Nigeria’s shortfall in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals stems less from institutional collapse than from pathological inertia rooted in structural rigidity. Bureaucracies remain policy-dense yet execution-poor, constrained by rigid procedures, fragmented authority, and weak transmission mechanisms that blunt implementation. The core contribution is the analytical separation of institutional decay from structural rigidity, with evidence that rigidity is the binding constraint on SDG delivery, reframing Sustainable Development Goal 16 as the pivotal enabler across goals. By shifting attention from corruption or capacity deficits to everyday administrative routines, the paper explains why reform-rich states remain outcome-poor. Limitations are acknowledged. The analysis relies on aggregate indicators and a short SDG time series, limiting causal depth and subnational inference; budget execution is treated structurally due to data constraints. Future research should deploy micro-level administrative data, sectoral SDG outcomes, and comparative designs to test generalizability. Looking ahead, Nigeria’s sustainable development challenge is institutional.

Policy takeaway: Prioritize reforms that rewire bureaucratic execution (coordination, budget delivery, and learning) before adding new policies, as institutional rigidity is the binding constraint on SDG progress.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing directly from the finding that structural rigidity, rather than institutional decay, dominates SDG underperformance, policy action should target the bureaucratic choke points where inertia is empirically shown to bind.

First, because inertia bites hardest at the implementation interface, immediate reforms should hard-wire cross-ministerial coordination and time-bound execution rules for SDG programmes. The evidence that stable bureaucratic indicators coexist with weak outcomes implies that Nigeria’s problem is not absence of capacity but failure of coordination; fixing this directly addresses the dominant rigidity channel.

Second, given the persistent mismatch between allocations and outcomes, budget execution, not budget size, must become the core reform metric. Linking senior officials' evaluations to capital budget delivery rates responds to the study's finding that under-execution is a central mechanism through which inertia translates into outcome scarcity.

Third, since monitoring and evaluation currently reinforce compliance rather than learning, M&E systems should be redesigned to trigger corrective action, not reports. This follows from the finding that bureaucratic routines persist because feedback loops are weak.

Taken together, the results imply that for Nigeria, advancing the Sustainable Development Goals requires sequencing reforms toward bureaucratic adaptability under Sustainable Development Goal 16, before introducing new policies.

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