

## A Mid-Term Review of Nigeria's Progress Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

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### **Abstract**

*Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations were adopted in September 2015 as a follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which had ended with very little success in Nigeria. Though the 17 ambitious goals of the SDGs are expected to be achieved in 2030, evidence shows that Nigeria did not only carry the goals of MDGs into the SDGs era but also began the implementation of the SDGs late, after the first Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2017. This study reviewed Nigeria's progress towards sustainable development with consideration to the international treaty signed by UN member countries for achieving the SDGs in 2030. A descriptive historical research design was adopted for the study, while data were gathered from the official websites of government and inter-governmental organizations and national newspapers that were purposively selected and compared to ensure data quality. Two research questions were answered in a content review analysis. Findings revealed that Nigeria has a structure in place across levels of government to ensure the smooth implementation of the SDGs; compared to the SDGs baseline report of 2016, and the SDGs index rankings from 2019 to 2022, Nigeria's progress towards achieving the SDGs in 2030 has been slow and poor; and that corruption among public officials, poor budgetary allocations to health and education, rising poverty and youth unemployment rates, and weak development policies and programs, are the major challenges affecting the progress of SDGs implementation in Nigeria. The study recommended the urgent need to review and strengthen government institutions and policies, introduce stringent laws against corruption, establish mechanisms for public transparency and accountability in governance, and promote reward good behaviours in public offices.*

**Key Words:** Sustainable development goals, mid-term, review, progress, Nigeria.

### **1. Introduction**

Sustainable development is a construct that refers to the type of development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own development needs. Simply put, sustainable development can be said to be a continuous development aimed at balancing growth and development in all areas without the forfeiture of one for the other. Thus, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were the brainchild of the 70th regular session of the United Nations General Assembly of September 2015, in New York, where heads of state and governments adopted the SDGs as the 2030 Development Agenda (United Nations' Report, 2015). The SDGs are a fifteen-years vision expressed in a framework that contains 17 goals, 169 targets and 232 key performance indicators, which represent a universal call to action to end poverty, safeguard the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by the year 2030 (Atiret & Mboho, 2019; United Nations' Report, 2019; Paganini et al., 2018).

The 17 SDGs which, according to United Nations Development Programme, are referred to as global goals and a yardstick for measuring development among member countries are committed to:

- (i) End poverty in all its forms everywhere;
- (ii) End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture;
- (iii) Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all of all ages;
- (iv) Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all;
- (v) Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls;
- (vi) Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;
- (vii) Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable management of water and modern energy for all;
- (viii) Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all;
- (ix) Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation;
- (x) Reduce inequality within and among countries;
- (xi) Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;
- (xii) Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns;
- (xiii) Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts;
- (xiv) Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development;
- (xv) Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss;
- (xvi) Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; and
- (xvii) Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

Nigeria is a critical stakeholder in the achievement of the SDGs, not only because of her membership among the 193 United Nations member states but also as the most populous Black Country in the world whose achievements of the SDGs will positively impact the African population and continent. Conversely, many scholars view the SDGs as an upgrade of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were adopted and implemented between the years 2000 and 2015 (Akinloye, 2018; Wysokinska, 2017), however, there were concerns that the implementation experiences of the MDGs resulted to some environmental and climatic consequences which necessitated a redefinition of a development that is sustainable.

The SDGs took effect on the 1st of January, 2016 amidst concerns about various assessment reports on Nigeria's late commencement, low performance and failure to achieve the MDGs target of the year 2015 (Akinloye, 2018; Durokifa & Abdul-wasi 2016; NBS Report 2015; Otive, 2006). However, the commencement of the SDGs was to be overseen by the new government led by President Buhari, which was about seven months before SDGs implementation began officially, and adopted strategies to avoid repeating the failure of the MDGs. Thus, one of such strategies was to adapt the SDGs initiative to the national development programme and deploy different levels of staff in relevant government ministries, departments and agencies.

In addition, the office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on Sustainable Development Goals (SSAP-SDGs) was reconstituted and designated as the major implementing actor of the programme, with the mandate of providing leadership and guidance on the SDGs, coordinating and integrating the SDGs into Nigeria's national development plans, and developing an actionable framework for implementation at the national, state and local government levels (Office of the SSAP-SDGs, 2017). The SSAP-SDGs were accountable to the Presidential Advisory Committee on SDGs, headed by the President of Nigeria. The office of the SSAP-SDGs was also expected to consult regularly with all key stakeholders in the public sector, states and local governments, civil society organizations, and private sectors, amongst others. Also, the office of the SSAP-SDGs was required to engage in collaboration across sectors in the implementation, monitoring, and reporting of the SDGs and provide regular sensitization on SDGs' activities to the general public (SSAP-SDGs, 2017).

Since the establishment of the office of the SSAP-SDGs, a roadmap focusing on six thematic areas of policies, institutions, data management, partnership, communication, and finance for the implementation of the SDGs in Nigeria was developed. This implementation programme was intended to be carried out in three phases across the SDGs' 15-year reign (Medickson 2016). The first phase (2016 – 2020) aimed at building on the existing foundations. This stage was to determine the ultimate trajectory of the programme by establishing effective institutions and innovative policies and ensuring political buy-in and integration of the SDGs into national and sectorial policy frameworks. The second phase (2021 – 2026), which is the longest phase, focuses on the scale-up and full implementation of the roles of institutions to monitor the implementation agenda and policies. The third and last phase (2027 – 2030) is the final year of the programme and is to ensure full coverage in the most challenging areas where no person is left behind (Nigeria's Road to SDGs 2015). According to the 2020 SDGs assessment report by UNDP (2021), the office of the SSAP-SDGs enjoys partnership and support from the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). Nigeria also receives support from the Coalition of Civil Society Organizations (Winjobi, 2018), and the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID, 2017).

While there appears to be a structure in place for the effective implementation of the SDGs in Nigeria, as well as considerable efforts made by the implementing actors, recent development statistics are worrisome and this situation is exacerbated by the slow recovery from the global pandemic, hence, suggesting an urgent need for the assessment of progress made in the implementation/achievement of the SDGs in Nigeria. In addition, there is little public knowledge about SDGs and how governments across levels factor the SDGs into development projects (Njoku 2016). Also, experience in the past has shown that development issues are often overtaken by-elections and electoral processes in Nigeria, and this situation is capable of delaying or negatively affecting the SDGs implementation progress (Ifegbesan et al 2017).

A treaty is a formal and legally binding written agreement between actors in international law, which is usually made by and between sovereign states (Shaw, 1977). A treaty can also involve international organizations, business entities, legal persons and influential individuals, and is legally binding on the parties and considered as such under international law (Meyer, 2014). A treaty may also be known as an international agreement, pact, protocol, covenant, convention, or exchange of letters, among other terms (Miller, 2009). Thus, the SDGs as documented and endorsed by all heads of state and governments of the 193 UN member states including Nigeria, is a treaty that is legally binding on all countries involved, which can be sanctioned under international laws, in the case of a breach of the agreement. It is against this background that this study seeks to examine Nigeria's progress towards achieving

sustainable development with oversight on the influence of the international treaty signed among the United Nations member states for ensuring accountability.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Since the return of democracy in the fourth republic, successive administrations in Nigeria have struggled to implement various development agendas with low success, impact, and sustainability. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provided by the United Nations and endorsed by member states including Nigeria, provided the trajectory and leeway for development to the former government of former President Obasanjo, however, actions were not taken in the year 2000 when the MDGs took off globally. Researchers trace Nigeria's commencement of MDGs to the year 2005 after the country secured debt cancellation/relief, which enabled the government to save about US\$1 billion annually (Durokifa & Abdul-wasi 2016).

The problem is that Nigeria not only lost invaluable time in the implementation of MDGs but also failed to achieve the MDGs in the closing year of 2015. Thus, there was a carryover effect of most of the MDGs into the commencement of the SDGs, and this situation hardly placed the country on the same pedestal as other developing countries. This could slow the progress made towards achieving SDGs comparatively.

There is also the problem of abandoning or restructuring structures that were initially set up by previous governments to implement development goals. For example, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) and State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) were set up by the Obasanjo's administration as a reform programme to lay a foundation for sustainable poverty reduction, employment generation, wealth creation and value re-orientation, to address the MDG goal of 'Eradicating Extreme Poverty and Hunger', unfortunately, succeeding administration abandoned this foundational programme (Ifegbesan et al 2017; Durokifa & Abdul-wasi 2016).

In addition, the administrative bottlenecks involved in setting up or reforming structures in Nigeria take the better part of the implementation period. For instance, the office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs (SSAP-SDGs) earmarked the first phase of SDGs implementation for five years (2016 and 2020), as a period of building on the existing foundations without any concrete or practical implementation activity stated to achieve them. This implies that, although 7 years out of the earmarked 15 years for the achievement of the SDGs have been spent, Nigeria's progress assessment in terms of real implementation will be based on just 2 years (2021 and 2022) even as all member states approach a mid-term assessment of the SDGs achievement.

Moreover, the issue of corruption in public offices has been a cog in the wheel of development programmes in Nigeria, as numerous cases have shown that high-ranking public officials cart away huge sums of money through budget inflations, technology manipulations and various other means, thereby making funding of various development projects difficult and impossible. The persistent financial corruption phenomenon is exacerbated by a lack of accountability, poor legislation and inadequate punitive measures against perpetrators. The practice of nepotism in recruitment and appointments into public offices has made the very bad situation worse in terms of accountability and delivery.

Though the implications of the international treaty may spur Nigeria to fasten her seatbelt and drive the SDGs implementation faster and more accountable, a mid-term evaluation is necessary to understand where things stand and the speed required to accelerate the implementation progress. The objective of this study is to analyze the implementation progress towards the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria; examine the structures put in place across levels of government for implementation of the SDGs; and assess the level of progress made towards the achievement of the SDGs in the year 2030.

### **3. Research Questions**

What structures are put in place across levels of government to ensure smooth implementation of the SDGs?

What is the level of progress made so far towards the achievement of the SDGs in the year 2030?

### **4. Method**

This study adopts a descriptive and historical research design to examine Nigeria's progress towards sustainable development through the lens of accountability to the international treaty on SDGs by the UN member states. Various milestones achieved in the implementation of SDGs in Nigeria between 2016 and 2022 are the subject of description in view for this study. Using a qualitative method, data were obtained from secondary sources, including reports of various national and international development organizations, media and relevant textbooks.

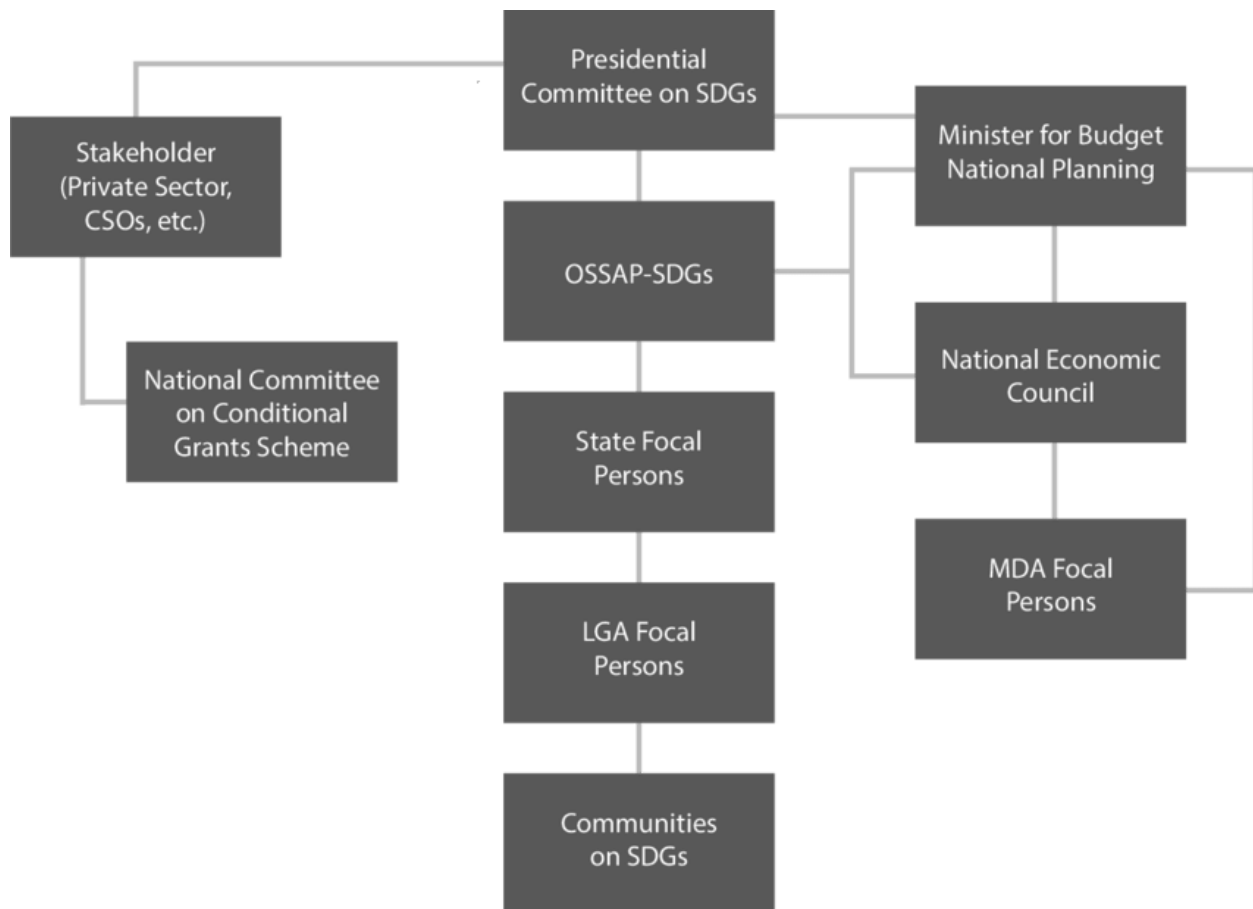
A purposive sampling method was utilized to gather secondary data from selected government and non-governmental development organizations' reports; journals and media publications on SDGs, and relevant textbook documentation. Data quality in terms of reliability and validity of information was also assessed through detailed online profiling and verification of the sources of data and triangulation of sources. Data gathered were content analyzed.

### **5. Findings**

**Research Question One:** What structures are put in place across levels of government to ensure smooth implementation of the SDGs?

The operational structure for SDGs implementation published by the Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs (OSSAP-SDGs), provides an insight into Nigeria's approach towards SDGs implementation. See figure 1:

Fig. 1



**Source:** OSSAP-SDGs (2017).

Nigeria has a structure in place across levels of government to ensure the smooth implementation of the SDGs. Analysis of communication flow and hierarchy shows that the Presidential Committee on SDGs (PC-SDGs) heads the SDGs implementation structure and works directly with stakeholders, including the private sector (PS) and civil service organizations (CSOs), which are both regulated by the National Committee on Conditional Grants Scheme (NCCGS). The Presidential Committee on SDGs (PC-SDGs) also works with the Minister for Budget and National Planning. Further analysis of the structure shows that the OSSAP-SDGs office works with the Minister for Budget and National Planning and the National Economic Council and reports directly to the PC-SDGs. Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDA) focal persons work with the National Economic Council (NEC) and Minister for Budget and National Planning, while communities' focal persons (CFPs) work with local government focal persons (LGFPs) who report to the state government focal persons (SGFPs), and the SGFPs report to the OSSAP-SDGs directly. Findings on the involvement of the legislature in SDGs implementation revealed that though the President Buhari-led administration had a House Committee on Poverty Alleviation, there was no such committee in the Senate, and the situation remains unclear with the new administration led by President Tinubu.

**Research Question Two:** What is the level of progress made so far towards the achievement of the SDGs in the year 2030?

According to findings of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS, 2018), conducted by the United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) and the Nigerian Government,



Nigeria's number of out-of-school children rose from 10.5 million in 2010 to 13.2million by 2016; about a year into the implementation of the SDGs. The DHS report also noted that at least 40 million people in Nigeria lacked access to basic healthcare, 40% had no social protection, and the maternal mortality rate was 70 out of 100,000 live births. Also in 2015, girls' access to education stood at 48.3% and 47.9% respectively, water supply and sanitation were poor, and cost the Nigerian economy approximately 1.3% of GDP annually, while over 90 million Nigerians (50% of the population in 2015) lacked access to electricity, and less than 5% of micro, small, and medium businesses had adequate access to financial credit (Durokifa, and Abdul-wasi, 2016).

These baseline findings informed the administration of President Buhari to put some programmes in place to improve the situation, pending the institutionalization of the SDGs implementation structure in 2017, two years after SDGs implementation started among UN member countries. A review of government publications by the OSSAP-SDGs highlighted some federal government programs facilitated through the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) office. According to the OSSAP-SDGs, the goal of NSIP was to provide 'Social Safety Nets' programs. In June 2016, the Federal Government of President Buhari received a 500million Dollar International Development Association loan from The World Bank, and provided an additional 1.3billion Dollars from the budget to support the government initiative to fund targeted economic development programs (Ibraheem, 2018). Thus, the NSIP office implemented four programs (N-Power, Conditional Cash Transfer, Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme, and Home Grown School Feeding Programme), to address poverty and promote economic development. According to Ojo, (2023), these programmes have supported more than 4 million beneficiaries across the country through a fair and transparent process monitored by the Ministry of Budget and National Planning and affiliated MDAs.

**The N-Power Programme:** The N-Power programme was designed to address the issue of youth unemployment and help increase social development. The Program targeted graduate and non-graduate Nigerians between the ages of 18 and 35 years, to help them acquire and develop life-long skills and become change-makers in education, agriculture, health, and vocational training, communities. According to NSIP (2023), N-Power had over 1.3million beneficiaries across the country. It is important to note that, with President Buhari's goal of lifting 100 million Nigerians out of poverty within 10 years, this achievement might be a far cry because the feat achieved so far accounts for over 8 years of efforts.

**Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Programme:** This programme was designed to transfer monthly stipends of N5000 (Five thousand Naira) cash to the most vulnerable households in poverty-stricken communities, with the long-term goal of lifting millions out of poverty. An additional N5000 was to be given to families designated as priorities or extreme cases. As of November 2022, the number of beneficiaries of the CCT programme stood at 2 million, reaching 609 LGAs, 6,272 wards and 48,789 communities (NCTO, 2022). This achievement towards the goal of lifting 100 million Nigerians out of poverty within 10 years is also very slow and poor.

**Home Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP):** This was designed to provide nutritious and balanced meals to 5.5 million school children in primary 1 to 3, to improve the enrollment of primary school children and reduce the out-of-school rate, which the 2018 UNICEF-DHS report had shown was increasing. Over 44,000 cooks were engaged on the programme, to feed over 4 million students in 26 Nigerian States. According to NSIP (2023), the HGSFP is currently running in over 53,000 public schools and feeding 9.9 million pupils

in 35 States and the FCT. Also, the programme is currently engaging over 127,000 food vendors and 100 aggregators. Going by an insight into the baseline data of 13.2million out-of-school children in Nigeria as provided by the UNICEF and FG-DHS report (2018), and the 2022 UNESCO report that approximately 20 million Nigerians were out of school, it is safe to imply that the HGSFP has not contributed significantly towards reducing the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

**Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP):** This was established to provide capital support and training to businesses and entrepreneurs at the bottom of the financial ladder, by providing low-cost micro-lending to one million women, 200,000 artisans and MSMEs, 260,000 youth businesses, and 200,000 farmers and agricultural workers. A federal government grant of N140billion Naira was invested in the programme, and loans of between N50,000 and N300,000 Naira were given to women under the marketmoni program, farmers under the farmermoni program, and enterprising youths under the tradermoni program. GEEP was targeting 1.66 million Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises beneficiaries (NSIP, 2023). So far, government records on the level of achievement of the GEEP target are vague, however, findings show that GEEP has not achieved its goals in many States across Nigeria (Akenbor, & Obeki, 2022; Arikewuyo, & Akanbi, 2020; Ayogu, et al, 2019).

Although there is some form of progress in the world's SDGs Index records which show that Nigeria, initially ranked 160 out of 166 countries in the 2020 World's SDGs Index, is currently ranked 146 out of 166 countries on the 2023 SDGs Index, with an index score of 54.3, and spillover score of 98.5, this findings shows that the level of progress made so far towards an achievement of the SDGs in year 2030 in Nigeria is slow and poor despite the presence of several government intervention programs.

## 6. Discussion

Nigeria's progress towards achieving the SDGs can generally be described as slow, given that first, the country was unable to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), at the programme's terminal point in 2015 (Ayoola, et al, 2018; Akinloye, 2018). While many countries had begun implementation of the SDGs in 2016, Nigeria was still struggling with the MDGs carried over and could not conveniently start the SDGs implementation until 2017, when the first voluntary national review (VNR) took place. The implication is that while other countries were learning and adjusting their implementation plans, Nigeria was not only two years behind but also, the only implementation milestone as of 2017 was the setting up of OSSAP-SDGs. The actual factoring of the SDGs into Nigeria's development plans and budgets began after the second VNR in 2020 (Fada, et al, 2022), yet, the implementation progress was dealt a heavy blow by the outbreak of COVID 19 pandemic that restricted movements and several activities. Also, Fada, et al. (2022), while appraising Nigeria's progress in achieving SDGs goal-13 (Climate Action Goal), found that the results achieved so far did not reflect the expected results from the much-hyped government programmes, and concluded that so far, the tire was yet to hit the tare and Nigeria may risk not being able to attain SDGs in 2030.

Although there is a balanced and inclusive implementation structure, as well as a carefully designed monitoring and evaluation system in place, the level of progress has been generally slow and poor, and this is not unconnected with several challenges including corruption in the implementation of development programmes, rising poverty, poor budgetary allocations to education and health among others. Oftentimes, Nigeria puts the right structures and plans in place but ends up achieving nothing with them. There is a high tendency among many public officials in positions of authority, including development agencies to circumvent processes, structures and systems (Atakpa & Akpan, 2023). Hence, it is difficult to explain why the President Buhari administration claimed a successful implementation of several social



welfare intervention programmes to reduce poverty and youth unemployment, yet, recorded an astronomical rise in unemployment, thereby having the highest number of poor persons in the world. As observed by Ogbodo et al., (2021), while analyzing the progress, pitfalls and prospects for attaining environmental-related sustainable development goals in Nigeria, the country seems to have a workable structure for effective implementation of the SDGs, although on paper, but has not backed it up with decisive strategic actions to guaranteed the attainment of those goals. Similarly, Ayoola, et al., (2018) undertook a policy situation analysis for achieving Zero Hunger (SDG2) in target states in Nigeria and reported that the SDGs implementation structure of Nigeria can achieve more with the full involvement of relevant legislative committees.

The SDGs mid-term evaluation is expected to be carried out across UN member countries in 2023, with a projected result of at least 50% achievement of each goal. Halfway to the target year of 2030, some countries have developed and deployed various acceleration plans to ensure complete achievement in the year 2030, however, available evidence suggests that Nigeria may not score 30% achievement on many of the SDGs at mid-term, and the hope of meeting the target looks bleak, except deliberate actions are taken to accelerate and fast-track implementation (Fada, et al, 2022; Ogbodo et al., 2021). Moreover, challenges of accountability for development in Nigeria have become a thing of major concern to citizens and the international community. This is particularly so, considering the enormous resources (human and material) at the disposal of the government since political independence in 1960 (Davies, et al, 2019; Barnes, and Chatterton 2018; Crowther, Seifi, and Moyeen, 2018). For instance, the Federal Government of Nigeria realized billions of US dollars from crude oil and natural gas, sadly, this has been squandered without a corresponding development and improvement in the living conditions of the people. Scholars have attributed different reasons for the nation's inability to experience sustainable development including poor leadership, poor resource management, poor maintenance culture, challenge of accountability on the part of public employees, unethical behaviours among public officials, weak government institutions, high cost of governance and insufficient funds to execute development projects, corruption and mismanagement of public funds (Ogbodo et al., 2021; Idowu et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2020). Unfortunately, these factors have continued to negatively affect sustainable development initiatives in Nigeria.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper carried out a mid-term review of Nigeria's progress towards achieving sustainable development. The study found that although the country set up structures for the implementation of SDGs, the progress towards the achievement of the SDGs is generally slow. From the foregoing, it could be concluded that Nigeria is in dire need of public officials and leaders with genuine commitment to development and accountability at the federal, state, and local government levels to overcome the challenges against sustainable development. This is likely to be realized as the Federal Government of Nigeria adopts a more practical approach devoid of ethnic, religious and political sentiments to promote accountability through a determined fight against unethical behaviours and corruption in high places. This will put the country on the right trajectory to achieving the SDGs within the targeted time frame by 2030.

## **8. Recommendations**

1. This study found that there is an inclusively established structure with a clear hierarchy and responsibilities for the smooth and effective implementation of SDGs across levels of government in Nigeria. Therefore, the federal, state and local governments must also ensure that funds allotted to developmental projects are properly disbursed to the groups concerned. This Commitment will ensure adequate provision of social and infrastructural services that are beneficial to the masses; fostering growth, and the provision of an enabling environment to boost businesses in different dimensions.
2. Government should design and implement effective monitoring, evaluation and accountability systems across levels, to ensure that the objectives of SDGs are achieved effectively. Therefore, the SDGs implementation decisions should be evidence-based and data quality must be ensured at all times, to avoid confusion. Also, the culture of transparency and accountability should be demonstrated through the monitoring and evaluation systems.
3. There is an urgent need for deliberate measures to review and strengthen development programmes and partnerships, and integrate learning from previous programs in new program planning, design and implementation, to accelerate the SDGs implementation. To this end, leaders are encouraged to pay adequate attention to human development as well as the plights of the masses under their jurisdiction.
4. Finally, there is an urgent need to review and strengthen government institutions and policies, and introduction of stringent laws against corruption, and establish mechanisms for public transparency and accountability in governance, as well as promote and adequately reward good behaviours in public offices.

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