



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### SYMBOLIC RAILWAY POLICIES: A POST-CIVIL WAR ECONOMIC SANCTIONS ON SOUTH EAST NIGERIA: AN IMPLICATION FOR CONSPIRACY THEORY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL NEGLECT

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#### ABSTRACT

The Southeast region of Nigeria has faced persistent underdevelopment, particularly in the railway sector, since the end of the Biafran War. This study argues that the federal government's alleged neglect and sabotage of railway infrastructure in the region constitutes a de-facto economic sanction contributing significantly to the region's underdevelopment, social unrest and a rise in criminal activities. The analysis moves beyond a simple assessment of infrastructure deficit, exploring deeper symbolic implications of this neglect. The unfulfilled promises surrounding railway revitalization, eroding trust in federal government and fostering sense of disenfranchisement among the population, perpetuating inequality and hindering economic growth. This paper analyzes the historical context and economic consequences of this neglect, demonstrating how the absence of functional railway services has stifled economic activities, hindered job creation and disrupted cultural exchange in the region. It further proposes a set of policy recommendations to revitalize the railway sector in the South East, including establishment of a dedicated railway service commission, a federal payroll and pension scheme for railway workers, the promotion of public-private partnership and prioritization of infrastructure development. The paper concludes by outlining a comprehensive implementation plan, emphasizing the need for feasibility studies, a dedicated project management team, secure funding mechanisms and a robust monitoring and evaluation framework. By implementing these recommendations, the Nigerian government can address the historical injustices faced by the South East and create a more equitable and prosperous future for the region.

**Keywords:** Economic sanction, railway policies, conspiracy, psychological neglect

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## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's independence in 1960 held the promise of a unified and prosperous nation, yet the reality has been far from equitable across its diverse regions. The southeast, in particular, stands as a stark example of persistent underdevelopment, a legacy shaped by decades of systemic neglect and a complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors. This underdevelopment is acutely visible in the region's severely deficient infrastructure, most notable its dilapidated and largely abandoned railway network (Falola and Heaton, 2008). The absence of functional railway lines in the southeast isn't merely a consequence of benign neglect; it's a symptom of deeper issues, fueled by persistent accusations of deliberate sabotage and a pervasive sense of marginalization within the national political landscape (Ekpe, 2020). By analyzing the historical development of the Nigeria railway network and tracing the decline of railway infrastructure in the south east, this paper will demonstrate how the absence of railway services has profoundly impacted the region's economic growth, employment opportunities and cultural exchange (Jin and Shi, 2017). Furthermore, the economic consequences of this neglect are profound and far reaching. This paper will demonstrate how the absence of efficient railway services has severely hampered the southeast's economic growth, significantly limiting its potential for industrial development, agricultural export, and overall economic diversification. The lack of reliable transportation has stifled trade, increased the cost of goods, and reduced access to markets, hindering the region's competitiveness. Also the absence of railway infrastructure has had a devastating impact on employment opportunities, limiting job creation and perpetuating a cycle of poverty. The social and cultural ramifications are equally significant, with the lack of efficient transportation hindering cultural exchange, social mobility and integration within the broader Nigerian society (Ekpe, 2020).

Beyond a critical analysis of the past, this paper will propose a set of concrete and actionable policy recommendations aimed at revitalizing the railway sector in the southeast. These



recommendations will address not only the immediate infrastructural needs but also the underlying political and economic factors that have contributed to the region's marginalization. The aim is to develop a comprehensive strategy that fosters sustainable economic growth, creates employment opportunities, and promotes social equity within the region, ultimately ensuring that the southeast enjoys its rightful place within the Nigerian economic landscape (Ekpe, 2020).

### **1.1. Background:**

A legacy of the civil war and railway infrastructure Nigeria's railway network, a relic of the colonial era, was fundamentally designed to serve the extractive interests of the British Empire (Achebe, 2005). Its primary function was the efficient transport of raw materials- agricultural produce and minerals- from the interior to coastal ports for export to the global market (Aderinwale, 2018). While the railway system did contribute to some degree of inter-regional connectivity and facilitated trade and cultural exchange, its development was inherently biased, reflecting the colonial power's priorities rather than a balanced approach to national development (Akinjide, 1975). This inherent imbalance laid the groundwork for the post-independence challenges that would disproportionately affect regions like the southeast.

The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) served as a catastrophic turning point, inflicting irreparable damage on the Southeast's railway infrastructure. The conflict resulted in the widespread destruction and abandonment of railway lines, stations and rolling stock, leaving the region's transportation network in ruins (Iwilade, 2018). The post-war period witnessed a failure of the federal government to adequately address the region's infrastructural needs. Reconstruction efforts were unevenly distributed with the southeast consistently receiving less attention and investment compared to other parts of the country (Odozi, 2019). This systematic underinvestment, coupled with the lack of maintenance, led to the gradual and inexorable deterioration of the remaining railway infrastructure in the southeast. The result was the



complete cessation of railway services in many areas, leaving the region isolated and economically disadvantaged (Udejaja, 2017). This neglect wasn't simply a matter of resource constraints; it is widely perceived as a reflection of deeper political and economic marginalization.

## **2.0. The Symbolic Dimension: Conspiracy Theories and the Psychology of Neglect**

The unfulfilled promises regarding railway revitalization in southeast Nigeria possess a symbolic weight that extends far beyond the mere lack of infrastructure (Nwosu and Nwosu, 2019). The repeated assurances from the federal government, followed by a consistent lack of action, have not only created tangible economic hardship but have also fostered a deep-seated sense of betrayal and resentment (Enudu, 2019). This perceived broken trust fuels a climate of frustration and anger, contributing to social unrest and potentially even violent conflict. The abandoned railway lines themselves become powerful symbols, representing more than just a transportation deficit, they embody the perceived marginalization and systematic neglect of the southeast region (Okro and Okechukwu, 2017). This perceived neglect fuels various conspiracy theories, contributing significantly to the frustration-aggression dynamic within the population. The lack of transparency and accountability surrounding the failure to revitalize the railways allows for the proliferation of narratives suggesting deliberate marginalization or even a form of economic warfare against southeast (Udejaja, 2017). These narratives, while not necessarily factually accurate, tap into existing feelings of disenfranchisement and distrust, amplifying the sense of injustice and fueling anger. The absence of a credible counter-narrative from the federal government allows these conspiracy theories to take root and flourish, further exacerbating the situation. The symbolic power of the abandoned railways lies in their visual representation of broken promises and unfulfilled expectations (Ekpe, 2020). The rusting tracks, overgrown vegetation and dilapidated stations serve as constant reminders of the federal government's alleged failure to invest in the region's development (Iwilade, 2018). These visual cues reinforce



the narrative of neglect, fueling feeling of resentment and anger. The failure to address this symbolic dimension, by simply focusing on the material aspects of infrastructure development, risks ignoring the deeper psychological wounds caused by the perceived betrayal of trust (Odozi, 2019). Furthermore, the symbolic dimension interacts with the tangible economic hardship caused by the lack of infrastructure. The economic difficulties faced by the people of the southeast are not experienced in isolation; they are interpreted within the context of the perceived betrayal and marginalization symbolized by the abandoned railways (Falola and Heaton, 2008). This combination of tangible hardship and symbolic injury creates a potent cocktail of frustration and anger, making the region more susceptible to social unrest and potentially violent conflict. Addressing this symbolic dimension requires not only infrastructural investment but also a concerted effort to rebuild trust, improve communication and foster a sense of equity and inclusion.

### **3.0. METHODOLOGY**

Historical design was employed in this study. Data were collected from secondary sources which includes, periodicals, books, survey data materials and internet materials that were relevant to the study. Content analysis was adopted, and conclusion drawn from the discourses through relevant inferences from the data,

### **4.0. DISCOURSES**

#### **4.1. The effects of the Conspiracies on the Psychological Behavior of the people of Southeast**

- **Increased Anxiety and Stress:** Belief in government conspiracies can significantly heighten anxiety and stress levels, especially when individuals perceive themselves as direct targets or victims of these alleged conspiracies. This heightened sense of threat can



manifest in several ways, including paranoia, distrust, and a profound feeling of vulnerability. The constant suspicious and fear associated with believing in such conspiracies can lead to chronic stress, impacting both mental and physical well-being (Debski, et al, 2022; Leibovitz et al, 2021).

- **Erosion of Trust in Authority:** Conspiracy theories frequently center on accusations of corruption, deception, and manipulation perpetrated by those in positions of power. This systemic undermining of authority figures and institutions can lead to a significant and widespread erosion of public trust, impacting not only faith in government but also in established sources of information and expertise. The consequences of this diminished trust can be profound and far-reaching, affecting social cohesion, political stability and public health (Swami et al, 2014). When individuals believe that powerful entities are deliberately withholding information or actively misleading the public, their faith in the integrity or actively misleading the public, their faith in the integrity of institutions is inevitably shaken. This is particularly true when conspiracy theories target government agencies, law enforcement or other authority structures responsible for maintaining public safety and order. The resulting distrust can manifest as cynicism, skepticism and a reluctance to accept information from official sources, even when that information is accurate and verifiable (Douglas and Sutton, 2011).
- **Social Polarization:** Conspiracy theories are not merely abstract beliefs; they often function as powerful tools that reinforce existing social divisions and actively contribute to increased polarization within society. The very structure of many conspiracy narratives which posit a small group of powerful elites manipulating the masses naturally creates an “Us vs. them” mentality. Those who believe in the conspiracy become part of an “in-group” sharing a sense of shared knowledge and understanding that sets them apart from the “out-group” of those who remain skeptical or unaware (Van and Van, 2014). Furthermore, conspiracy theories often exploit and exacerbate pre-existing social





divisions along lines of political affiliation, race, religion or socioeconomic status. Conspiracy narratives frequently scapegoat particular groups or individuals, attributing negative events or outcomes to their actions or influence. This can reinforce existing prejudices and stereotypes, leading to increased hostility and discrimination towards the targeting groups (Bronstein and Chu, 2017).

- **Increased Susceptibility to Misinformation:** A strong belief in conspiracy theories significantly increases an individual's susceptibility to misinformation and propaganda. This heightened vulnerability stems from a fundamental distrust of official narratives and establishes sources of information, leading individuals to actively seek out alternative explanation often from unreliable or biased sources. This creates a dangerous feedback loop, where the initial distrust fuels the acceptance of further misinformation, reinforcing the original conspiracy belief and making it increasingly difficult to correct (Herold, 2024).

#### **4.2. Social Unrest and Criminal Activities – A Fertile Ground for Violence**

The alleged neglect of railway infrastructure in Southeast Nigeria, with its attendant economic hardship and sense of political marginalization, has created a fertile ground for social unrest and a rise in criminal activity (Okeke, 2020). The lack of economic opportunities directly linked to the absence of a functional railway network, is a primary driver of this trend. Limited access to markets, increased transportation costs, and reduced participation in the national economy lead to widespread unemployment, particularly among young people. This economic desperation creates a vulnerable population susceptible to recruitment by criminal organizations. The promise of financial security even through illegal means becomes increasingly attractive when legitimate opportunities are scarce (Obasi, 2019). Beyond economic hardships, the feeling of being abandoned by the federal government fuels a sense of resentment and injustice. This perceived marginalization, reinforced by the symbolic weight of the neglected railways, erodes trust in the



government and institutions. This loss of faith in the system can lead to breakdown of social order and an increase in social unrest, manifesting in protests, demonstrations, and even violent clashes (Ayadike, 2018).

The combination of economic desperation and political marginalization creates a complex security environment. Criminal activities range from petty theft and extortion to more organized crime, including armed robbery, kidnapping and even militancy. These activities are not simply isolated incidents but often reflect a deeper societal malaise, fueled by a sense of hopelessness and disenfranchisement. The lack of trust in law enforcement and the perception of government indifference further exacerbate the situation, leading to a self-reinforcing cycle of violence and instability (Okoro and Okechukwu, 2017).

## **5.0. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

To revitalize the railway sector in south east Nigeria and ensure its long-term sustainability, a comprehensive strategy encompassing the following policy recommendations is required.

- **Establishment of a Dedicated Railway Service Commission:** A dedicated railway service commission, operating at the federal level should be established to oversee the budgeting, financing and management of all railway lines and services across the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria (Asiyanbola, 2017). This commission would be responsible for developing a national railway strategy, setting standards for safety and efficiency and ensuring equitable allocation of resources across region (Odi, 2019). Also the commission would be empowered to attract investment, manage contracts, and monitor the performance of railway operators, both public and private (Adeyemo, 2018).
- Federal payroll and pension scheme for all employees in the railway sector (Oyedele, 2019). This scheme would ensure consistent and reliable income for railway workers,





provide a safety net during times of economic hardship and encourage greater professionalism and commitment to the railway industry (Eze and Chukwu, 2017). It would also include provisions for comprehensive healthcare, training opportunities and retirement benefits creating a more attractive and sustainable career path for railway workers (Adejumo, 2018).

- **Public-Private Partnerships for Railway Maintenance and Development:** The federal government should actively encourage public-private partnership (PPPs) for the maintenance, rehabilitation and development of railway infrastructure in the southeast (World Bank, 2017). PPPs would leverage the financial and technical expertise of private sector partners, while ensuring that the government retains oversight and control over strategic railway assets (Asian Development Bank, 2017). Also transparent and competitive bidding processes should be implemented to attract reputable and experienced private sector partners (World Bank, 2018).
- **Prioritization of Infrastructure Development in the Southeast:** The federal government should prioritize the development of railway infrastructure in the South East, including the rehabilitation of existing lines and the construction of new ones (African Development Bank, 2019). This development should be guided by a comprehensive feasibility study that considers the region's economic needs, potential growth sectors, and existing infrastructure (International Finance Corporation, 2019). Projects should be prioritized based on cost-effectiveness, environmental sustainability, and the potential to stimulate economic growth and create employment opportunities (Asian Development Bank, 2017).

## 5.2. Implementation Plan



To ensure the successful and sustainable implementation of the policy recommendations outlined above, a comprehensive and well-structured implementation plan is crucial. This plan should encompass the following key steps:

- **Conduct Comprehensive Feasibility Studies:** Feasibility studies should be conducted for each proposed railway project, including the rehabilitation of existing lines, construction of new lines and the establishment of supporting infrastructure (stations, maintenance facilities etc). The studies should assess the technical feasibility of each project, considering factors like terrain, environmental impact and existing infrastructure. Detailed financial analyses should be undertaken to evaluate the cost effectiveness of each project, considering potential revenues, operating cost and return on investment (World Bank, 2019). It should assess the potential socio-economic benefits of each project, including job creation, economic growth and improved access to markets. There should also be thorough environmental impact assessments to mitigate potential negative impact and ensure sustainable practices (World Bank, 2019).
- **Establish a Dedicated Project Management Team:** A multidisciplinary project management team should be established, comprising experts in railway engineering, finance, construction, environmental management and social impact assessment (Project Management Institute, 2020). The team's responsibilities should include project planning, budgeting, procurement, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (Project Management Institute, 2020). The team should be accountable to the railway service commission and report regularly on project progress and challenges.
- **Secure Funding through Budgeting Allocations and Public-Private Partnerships:** The federal government should allocate sufficient funds in the national budget to support the implementation of the railway project (International Monetary Fund, 2018). The government should actively pursue public-private partnerships (PPPs) to leverage



private sector investment and expertise (World Bank, 2019). The government should explore various financial instruments to attract investments such as concession agreements, bonds and equity participation (World Economic Forum, 2019). All funding sources and project expenditures should be transparent and subject to independent audits to ensure accountability (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018).

- **Implement a Robust Monitoring and Evaluation Framework:** Develop clear performance indicators to track project progress against predefined goals and objectives. These indicators should include measures of project completion, cost efficiency, safety standards, and socio-economic impact (International Finance Corporation, 2018). Implement regular monitoring mechanisms to track project progress, identify potential issues and take corrective actions. This can involve periodic site visits, data analysis, and stakeholder consultations (Project Management Institute, 2020).

### Competing Interest

The authors have declared that no conflicting interest exist in this paper.

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