



Regional Socio-Economic Cooperation and Leadership Deficit in Southeast Nigeria

Abstract

The Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria, comprising five states with a population exceeding twenty million, possesses significant economic, natural, and human resources that could drive regional prosperity. Despite this potential, the region faces severe challenges including persistent insecurity, leadership deficit, and weak inter-state cooperation that have paralyzed economic activities and undermined governance. As at 2025, the Southeast has lost an estimated ₦7.6 trillion since 2021 due to enforced sit-at-home orders, violence, and security operations, while the broader Nigerian economy continues to grapple with inflation exceeding 20 percent and rising poverty rates estimated at 46 percent. This paper examined the contemporary state of socio-economic cooperation and leadership challenges in Southeast Nigeria, analyzing how governance failures have impacted regional development. Using the Developmental State theory as an analytical framework and employing explorative research design with secondary data analysis, the study revealed that disunity among political leadership, escalating insecurity involving multiple armed groups, and the absence of effective regional cooperation mechanisms remain the primary barriers to development. The paper recommended the emergence of unified regional leadership, implementation of comprehensive security reforms including state police, enhanced regional economic cooperation frameworks, and governance policies oriented toward sustainable development to unlock the region's immense potential.

Kennedy Ohazuruike, Ph.D

Yakubu Gowon University, Abuja

Department of Political Science

ORCID ID: 0009-0003-3952-8689

Corresponding Author's Email:

kennedyohazuruike@yahoo.com

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1. Introduction

Leadership remains the cornerstone of societal transformation and progress, serving as the engine that drives political stability, economic advancement, and social cohesion. The

capacity to lead and influence populations toward the actualization of collective goals distinguishes thriving societies from those mired in underdevelopment. In the Nigerian context, the leadership question has been particularly acute, with the

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nation's history marked by frequent governmental changes, institutional weakness, and poor governance that have shaped how citizens perceive politics and nation-building.

Since independence in 1960 to the restoration of democracy in 1999, Nigeria had seven military and three civilian heads of government. Coups and changes in government have caused the development of this instability trend which has made it impossible to breed democratic values and caused institutional vulnerability and institutionalized corruption (Ofoche, 2012). The development strategies that have ensued have been ineffective as they are more concerned with national needs instead of basic needs, which has created the inevitable inequality in development, inequality in terms of regions, and ethno-centric politics (Raheem, *et al.*, 2024).

By 2025, the economic trend of Nigeria is promising as well as threatening. After radical reforms that started in 2023, such as the abolition of fuel subsidies and liberalization of the foreign exchange market, there are already indications of economic stabilization, and GDP growth is estimated at 3.2-3.4 percent. Nevertheless, the inflation is still high and persistent (more than 20 percent) and the food inflation is over 40 percent, pushing the poverty level at 46 percent (IMF, 2025; World Bank, 2025). Although the reforms are required to achieve macroeconomic stability, this has led to the escalation of the cost-of-living crisis, and about 31 million Nigerians are food insecure.

Southeast geopolitical zone comprising of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States with eighty-five Local Governments Areas is illustrative of these national predicaments and has regional-specific impediments. The area, which has a population of more than twenty million people living in various commercial towns and cities, has been facing a very sharp decline in the living standards. Majority of the basic goods have been hiked out of the financial capability of the low-income earners with an abhorring security crisis crippling trade and living standards.

Since August 2021, forced sit-at-home orders by the pro-Biafran separatist groups, mostly the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its military arm, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), led to schools, markets and businesses shutting on Monday across big cities such as Onitsha, Aba, and Enugu. These disruptions have at least cost the Southeast ₦7.6 trillion of economic activity since 2021 according to recent estimates (Madueke, 2025). This economic bleed happens in the context of rampant violence with Amnesty International recording over 1,844 killings between January 2021 and December 2024 involving armed gunmen, criminal gangs, separatist groups, state-backed paramilitaries and security forces (Amnesty International, 2025).

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), Nigeria ranks the fifth most dangerous country in the world regarding the extremity of the conflict as of December 2024 (NOI Polls, 2024;

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ACLED, 2024). In May 2025, Nigeria alone documented 365 violent cases, more than any other African national that month with 635 killed and 182 abducted cases (Madueke, 2025).

Nonetheless, the Southeast has huge economic potential. The region is blessed with a variety of economic, natural and human resources, industrial zones, government and privately owned enterprises that form significant sources of revenue and rich entrepreneurial culture. Presence of such resources should have constituted good bases of economic collaboration among the states. Regrettably, the fact that there are few leaders with the capacity, compassion and ability to effect change has been the cog in the eye of development in the region.

This paper examines how leadership deficit has impacted socio-economic cooperation in Southeast Nigeria, with particular attention to contemporary realities as at 2025. Methodologically, the research employs an explorative design with data generated from secondary sources, including recent reports from international organizations, human rights bodies, economic analyses, and scholarly publications. The descriptive analytical style guides our assessment, anchored in the Developmental State theory framework.

2. Conceptual and Review of Related Literature

2.1 Economic Cooperation

Economic cooperation is one of the essential elements of international and regional integration that is focused on

the creation of the conditions that will help to promote trade and financial integration. In contrast to the conventional development assistance, economic cooperation focuses on the mutual benefits, joint expenses and the strategic role of both the state and business in the process of achieving economic objectives (O'Farrill, Fierro, Moraga, Perez & Vallejos, 1999).

The concept has developed tremendously following the issues of globalization and commercial integration. States have always been exchange partners and interdependent, economically speaking, on the basis of trade and investment. Modern economic cooperation is however not restricted to commercial exchanges but rather harmonization of regulations, standards in technical and even policies that will produce a conducive equilibrium in trade and competition (O'Farrill, *et al.*, 1999).

The main characteristics of economic cooperation are: economic gains connected with trade and capital flows; the orientation on mutually advantageous cooperation of cooperating actors; active involvement of the private sector because direct connection with the integration of the economy is conducted; the changing government role as facilitator and spokesman and not as an independent implementer; the orientation on the actions that should be aimed at achieving indirect short and medium-term economic objectives with the help of conditions that contribute to enhancing the competitiveness (O'Farrill, *et al.*, 1999).

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The concept of regional economic cooperation has become specifically popular in Africa. Despite the recent obstacles such as the pullout of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali in 2024-2025, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is still working towards economic integration, freedom of movement of people, and stability (ECOWAS, 2025). In the same vein, the fact that Nigeria is part of the BRICS partnership mechanism as of 2024 is an indication of increased South-South cooperation and other avenues through which the country can pursue economic development (Valori, 2025).

The conceptual base of regional cooperation has focused on the fact that trade, investment, transfer of technology, infrastructure development, and ICT cooperation have a direct positive impact on growth and development. Financial collaboration helps towards macroeconomic stability by lessening the effect of the unstable markets. Research, training, and academic exchange cooperation builds human resource capacity whose effects are positive in terms of infrastructure, ICT and energy development. Socio-economic cooperation, particularly, health and education enhance development, whereas political and security cooperation leads to institutional stability (ESCAP, 2018).

2.2 Leadership and Governance

Leadership is the capacity to lead, influence as well as motivate people or groups towards the realisation of shared goals and objectives. Governance In the governance context, leadership entails the ability to design and put policies in

place, which meet the societal needs, enhance justice, guarantee security, and economic prosperity. Leadership needs the ability to see the vision, have integrity, competence, and the willingness to serve the greater good (Etebom, Odekunle, Aminu & Olatunji, 2020).

The issue of leadership has been contentious in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria. The process of recruiting political leaders in the country has also been criticized as focusing on wealth, political affiliations and ethnic factors at the expense of competency and capacity (Oklobia & Maikasuwa, 2022). Such a faulty recruitment process has resulted in leaders that are not always visionary, committed and capable of transformative governance.

These are some of the issues that the 2022 Electoral Act was intended to cover through electoral reforms targeted at increasing transparency and credibility in the electoral process (Oklobia & Maikasuwa, 2022). Nonetheless, the emergence of quality leadership in any of the levels of government is still being hampered by implementation issues and the deep rooted political interests.

2.3 Leadership Deficit

Leadership deficit is the lack or insufficiency of strong leadership in terms of vision, competence, integrity and commitment to the wellbeing of the people. It is in many forms such as corruption, inconsistency in policies, lack of accountability, ethnic favoritism, and failure to deal with critical developmental issues (Lawal, Imokhuede & Johnson, 2012).

Leadership deficit in the case of southeast of Nigeria goes through lack of unified regional stand on key matters, failure to adequately tackle the security issues, failure to coordinate economic policies, poor mechanisms of inter-state cooperation and the prioritization of the partisan politics over the regional development (Elechi, Etea & Mbanusi, 2023).

3. Theoretical Framework: Developmental State Theory

Our discourse in this paper is anchored on the 'Developmental State' theory propounded by Johnson (1982) and popularised by Peter Evans (1995), Linda Weiss (2000) and Adrian Leftwich (1998). This theory argued that for any country to become industrialization, the State must not only be involve but must instigate and propel this venture because in most cases, the process of industrialisation has always been the driving force of the developmental objectives of the country. The theory of the developmental state has four essential propositions such as; development-oriented political leadership; an autonomous and effective bureaucracy; a production-oriented private sector, and performance-oriented governance. A developmental state to exist when the state possesses the vision, leadership and capacity to bring about a positive transformation of society within a condensed period of time. The developmental state was associated with rapid processes of industrialisation and/or the adoption of new technologies – that is, moving into higher value-added activities relative to

the starting point. Typically, there was a shift from subsistence agriculture to more commercial, export-oriented farming, or to textile processing, or to tourism, or a mixture of these.

In applying this theory to our study, we observed that the Nigeria state has it as its cardinal duty to not only provides the enabling environment for development, but to also be the instigator of the development trajectory, especially when it has to do with regional economic cooperation, integration and development. Therefore the government of the South-eastern states must not only make policies and plans for development, they must also be the instigator, implementer and executioner of the policies and plans.

4. Challenges of Regional Economic Cooperation in Southeast Nigeria

The Southeast geopolitical region experiences complex challenges, which have had a devastating effect on the economic cooperation and growth in the region. The challenges that are growing more and more difficult in the recent years can be divided into security dimension, economic dimension, infrastructural dimension, political dimension and institutional dimension.

4.1 Security Crisis and Insurgency

Since 2015, the security situation in Southeast Nigeria has become deplorable, and the crisis is at an unprecedented level in 2024-2025. It is a complex conflict environment with humanitarian and economic catastrophic effects that are caused by numerous actors such as IPOB/ESN, unknown gunmen, criminal gangs,

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cultists, state-supported paramilitants such as Ebube Agu, and security forces (Amnesty International, 2025; ImpACT International, 2025).

According to Amnesty International records, at least 1,844 individuals were killed during this time, January 2021 to December 2024 in the Southeast region, however, it is estimated that the number is probably much higher since many have died without being reported or even considered part of the missing population (Amnesty International, 2025). The violence victims are varied and include farmers, students, commuters, traditional rulers, political figures, security personnel and the common civilians.

The sit-at-home enforcement, which started on August 9, 2021 has produced disastrous economic effects. Businesses are closed, schools are closed, transport is stopped and economic activities in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States are stalled every Monday, or even other days. Individuals are flogged or murdered in case they disobey these commands and this has led to an atmosphere of fear that has paralyzed the area. Since 2021, cumulative economic loss has been 7.6 trillion or billions of dollars of potential economic activity (Madueke, 2025).

There are various aspects to the security crisis. To begin with, the insurgency of IPOB/ESN, which began to claim the independence of Biafran, as well as protests against apparent marginalization of the Igbo, has developed into armed conflict with the security forces in Nigeria. Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the IPOB, who has been in

detention since 2021, even after a Court of Appeal ruling in October 2022 said he should be released, has become a key point of contention. His persistence in remaining in detention, despite the court orders, is also a source of violence and a negation of the rule of law, according to many stakeholders (Nwanguma, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Second, the war has left room to criminal aspects. The Truth, Justice and Peace Commission, which was instituted by Anambra State Government, established that the main sources of insecurity are cultism, political thuggery and organized crimes, which politicians finance or protect, rather than simplistic beliefs that all violence is perpetrated by IPOB (Nwanguma, 2025). The discovery stresses that the issue of security is intricate and requires a delicate approach.

Third, in their attempts to restore the order, the security force activities have been associated with human rights violations such as killing people illegally, making arbitrary arrests, tortures, and forced disappearances among other, which complicates the relationship between the citizens and the state (Amnesty International, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

The lack of security has had far-reaching impacts that are not directly violent. There are a lot of individuals who have not visited their hometowns in recent years because of their fear of being attacked or kidnapped. The traditional ceremonies such as marriages and burials that are usually held in the

ancestral houses would now be held outside the southeast. It disrupts the educational activities and students can no longer attend school on a regular basis. The result has been flight of investment in the region, loss of already existing businesses, and an increase in unemployment (Nwagbo & Ofoke, 2025).

4.2 Economic Challenges

The economic issues of the Southeast are closely interconnected as well as not restricted to matters of security. Although the region has a tradition of entrepreneurship and business, there are a number of economic factors limiting the development and regional integration. The level of poverty and unemployment is still high, which is complemented by national economic policies as well as the insecurity in the region. Since the poverty rate in Nigeria is 46 percent, and 31 million people are impacted by food insecurity in the country, the situation in the Southeast is especially severe because it is accompanied by the economic losses associated with the conflict (IMF, 2025).

Purchasing power has been lost drastically due to inflation. Inflation is abnormal, more than 20 percent in the country, and the food inflation is over 40 percent, which implies that essential goods are beyond affordability. These national trends are exacerbated by the disruption of supply chains in the Southeast because of insecurity, sit-at-home, and low agricultural productivity, as farmers are not able to access their farmlands (World Bank, 2025).

Low industrial production and business shutdowns are experienced in the region. The industries, which were earlier flourishing in cities such as Aba, Onitsha and Nnewi, have been facing insecurity, extortion, multi taxation, inadequate infrastructure and poor business environment. The well known Ariaria International Market in Aba and Main Market in Onitsha which were once vibrant business hubs have been hit hard by the downturn of activity.

The finance continues to be an issue. The borrowing cost is now prohibitively high given the high interest rate which the Central Bank of Nigeria has been keeping to curb inflation and the small and medium enterprises which constitute the main part of the Southeast economy makes it prohibitive to borrow (CBN, 2024). The drastic depreciation of the naira by 95.6 percent in 2023 after the exchange rate was floated has further reduced the cost of conducting business that depends on imported raw materials and equipment as well as limiting productive activities (African Development Bank, 2024). The state level generation of revenues, though enhanced by the increment in federal allocation in light of the withdrawal of subsidy and devaluation of the naira, is insufficient to cover the colossal infrastructure and security projects. The state government has conflicting needs that demand scarce resources limiting their ability to facilitate developmental efforts.

4.3 Infrastructure Deficit

Poor infrastructure is a severe limitation of the economic collaboration and growth in the region. The state of road

infrastructure, specifically the interstate highways and rural road is in an appalling state. Although the federal government in December 2024 declared intentions to complete the Second Niger Bridge and other roads in the Southeast, the process has been slow and there still exist insufficient road network in general (Federal Ministry of Works, 2024). Bad roads add to the transportation expenses, market accessibility, and limit inter-state trade.

Electricity supply is still unstable even though the nation is doing its level best to enhance the state of electricity production and distribution. The Southeast is a place that experiences frequent blackouts which inhibit the industrial production, augment the costs of running a business by the reliance on costly generators that use diesel and limits economic activity. The Dangote Refinery commencement of operation in 2024 which is predicted to enhance availability of fuel has failed to be converted to stable power supply in the region (World Bank, 2025). Water and sanitation infrastructure is inadequate, with many communities lacking access to clean water and proper sewage systems. This deficit affects public health, quality of life, and the investment climate. Digital infrastructure, while improving nationally through initiatives like the National Broadband Plan (2020-2025) aiming for 70 percent penetration and projects like Google's Equiano Subsea Cable, remains uneven across the Southeast (Infrastructure Projects Database, 2025). Rural areas particularly lack connectivity, constraining participation in the digital economy.

4.4 Political and Institutional Challenges

Political fragmentation and institutional weakness constitute major obstacles to regional cooperation in the Southeast. Unlike other geopolitical zones that have developed strong regional cooperation frameworks, the Southeast lacks effective mechanisms for coordinated action. Political disunity among Southeast governors and leaders undermines collective bargaining and regional advocacy. While other zones present united fronts on issues affecting their regions, Southeast leaders often pursue individual state interests or align with different national political camps, weakening the region's voice and influence (Elechi, Etea & Mbanusi, 2023).

The absence of a functional regional economic cooperation body has left coordination to ad hoc arrangements. While the South East Nigeria Economic Commission (SENEC) was established to promote regional economic integration, it has been largely ineffective due to inadequate funding, weak institutional capacity, and lack of political commitment (Nwogbaga, 2011). Partisan politics often supersedes regional interests. Competition among political parties and individual ambitions prevent consensus-building on critical issues. This fragmentation extends to civil society, traditional institutions, and business communities, further weakening collective action capacity. Inter-state rivalries over economic advantages, political prominence, and federal resource allocation create tensions that undermine cooperation. States

sometimes pursue competitive rather than complementary economic strategies, resulting in duplication of efforts and missed opportunities for synergy.

Institutional weakness characterizes both state and regional bodies. Bureaucracies lack the capacity, autonomy, and professionalism necessary for effective policy formulation and implementation. Corruption, political interference, and weak accountability mechanisms undermine institutional performance. The absence of strong, merit-based civil services means that policy continuity and technical expertise are lacking.

4.5 Marginalization Perceptions and National Integration Challenges

The Southeast's development challenges are compounded by perceptions and realities of political and economic marginalization within the Nigerian federation. These grievances, whether fully justified or not, influence regional attitudes, political behavior, and cooperation prospects. Igbo people and the Southeast region are perceived to have been marginalized in federal appointments, resource allocation, and national decision-making since the end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970. This perception fuels separatist agitations and undermines commitment to national projects (Nsoedo, 2019; Ikerionwu, 2013).

The quest for an Igbo presidency, unfulfilled despite rotating power to other regions, reinforces feelings of exclusion. In the 2023 presidential election, the Southeast supported

Labour Party candidate Peter Obi, who won the region convincingly but lost nationally, further deepening frustration. Infrastructure projects in the Southeast have historically lagged behind other regions, though recent federal initiatives show some improvement. The Second Niger Bridge, under construction for years, symbolizes both the region's infrastructure needs and the slow pace of addressing them. These marginalization narratives, whether perceived or real, affect the Southeast's integration into national development frameworks and influence local leaders' willingness to cooperate with federal authorities, complicating governance and development efforts.

5. Leadership Deficit as the Bane of Regional Economic Cooperation

Leadership deficit stands as the fundamental obstacle to effective regional economic cooperation and development in Southeast Nigeria. This deficit manifests across multiple dimensions: vision and strategic planning, unity and cohesion, institutional capacity, accountability and transparency, and responsiveness to citizen needs.

5.1 Lack of Visionary Leadership

Southeast leadership has largely failed to articulate and pursue a compelling regional development vision. Unlike East Asian developmental states where leaders championed clear industrialization and modernization agendas, or even compared to other Nigerian regions that have developed strategic development plans, Southeast leadership has not coalesced around

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shared long-term goals. Individual state governors pursue separate agendas without coordination or complementarity. There is no regional master plan for industrial development, agricultural modernization, tourism promotion, or human capital development that commands buy-in across all five states. This absence of vision means opportunities for economies of scale, complementary investments, and collective bargaining are lost.

The lack of vision extends to addressing the security crisis. Rather than developing a comprehensive regional security strategy involving dialogue, community engagement, economic interventions, and security sector reform, responses have been fragmented, reactive, and often counterproductive. The establishment of Ebube Agu, a regional security outfit, was announced with fanfare but has not been effectively operationalized or coordinated across states.

5.2 Political Disunity and Factional Conflicts

Political disunity among Southeast leaders represents perhaps the most visible manifestation of leadership deficit. Governors belong to different political parties (All Progressives Congress, Labour Party, and formerly People's Democratic Party), and partisan considerations often trump regional interests. During critical moments requiring collective action, such as responding to security challenges, advocating for federal projects, or negotiating resource allocations, Southeast leaders have presented

discordant positions. This disunity weakens the region's bargaining power and allows external actors to exploit divisions.

The relationship between political leaders and separatist agitators is particularly problematic. While some leaders have called for dialogue and release of Nnamdi Kanu, others have taken hard-line positions or remained silent. This inconsistency confuses both the federal government and local populations, making resolution more difficult. Traditional and religious leaders, who could provide unifying voices, have also been divided along political and ideological lines. The absence of credible, neutral regional leadership figures who can convene stakeholders, mediate conflicts, and articulate collective positions has been sorely felt.

5.3 Weak Institutional Capacity

Leadership deficit is inseparable from institutional weakness. Southeast states generally lack strong, capable, autonomous bureaucracies that can drive development regardless of political transitions. Civil services suffer from politicization, with appointments based on political loyalty rather than competence. This undermines policy continuity and technical expertise.

Planning and economic management institutions within states are often weak, poorly staffed, and inadequately funded. Strategic plans, where they exist, are not seriously implemented or monitored. Data collection and analysis capacity is limited, meaning policies are often formulated without solid empirical

foundations. Regional institutions like SENEK lack the authority, resources, and political backing necessary for effective operation. Unlike the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), which despite its challenges has a federal mandate and substantial funding, Southeast regional bodies operate on goodwill and minimal resources. Corruption and lack of accountability further undermine institutions. Public resources are diverted, projects are awarded to political associates, and performance measurement is weak. This institutional weakness makes sustainable development nearly impossible even when leadership changes.

5.4 Short-term Political Calculations

Southeast leadership has been characterized by short-term political calculations rather than long-term developmental thinking. Electoral cycles drive decision-making, with leaders prioritizing projects that yield immediate political returns over investments with longer gestation periods. Infrastructure projects are often started with fanfare before elections but abandoned after, resulting in numerous uncompleted projects across the region. Agricultural and industrial development programs, which require sustained commitment, are neglected in favor of conspicuous consumption and politically visible but less impactful interventions. The competition for 2027 elections already influences current governance, with leaders positioning for higher offices or party nominations rather than focusing on delivering development. This political distraction

diverts attention and resources from pressing regional challenges.

5.5 Failure to Engage Citizens and Build Social Capital

Leadership deficit is also evident in the failure to genuinely engage citizens, civil society, and private sector actors in development planning and implementation. Governance remains largely top-down, with limited meaningful participation by stakeholders who should be development partners. Youth, who constitute a majority of the population and are most affected by unemployment and insecurity, are not effectively mobilized for productive activities. Rather than channeling youthful energy into entrepreneurship, innovation, and community development, leadership failures have left many young people vulnerable to recruitment by criminal gangs or radical groups.

Women, despite their significant role in commerce and social cohesion, are marginalized in decision-making. Traditional institutions and community organizations that could serve as bridges between government and citizens are not adequately engaged in governance processes. The private sector, which should be a key partner in economic development, faces an uncertain business environment characterized by insecurity, multiple taxation, extortion, and policy inconsistency. Rather than creating enabling environments for business growth, leadership failures have driven investment away from the region.

6. Areas of Potential Regional Socio-Economic Cooperation

Despite formidable challenges, the Southeast possesses significant potential for enhanced regional cooperation that could transform its economic trajectory and improve citizens' welfare. Identifying and pursuing these cooperation opportunities requires overcoming leadership deficits and institutional weaknesses.

6.1 Trade and Commerce

The Southeast's historical strength in trade and commerce provides a foundation for regional cooperation. Major markets including Onitsha Main Market, Ariaria International Market Aba, Ogige Market Nsukka, and others serve populations across Nigeria and beyond. Coordinated efforts to enhance market infrastructure, security, and regulatory harmonization could boost commerce. Inter-state trade facilitation through removal of multiple checkpoints, standardization of taxes and levies, and joint marketing initiatives for regional products could increase trade volumes and reduce transaction costs. Establishing a Southeast Trade Zone with harmonized commercial regulations could enhance competitiveness and attract investment.

6.2 Industrial Development

The Southeast's industrial heritage, particularly in manufacturing, light industries, and crafts, offers cooperation potential. Cities like Aba, Nnewi, and Onitsha have industrial clusters in footwear, automobile parts, plastics, and other sectors. Regional cooperation could focus on: Establishing industrial

parks with shared infrastructure and services across states; developing value chains that leverage each state's comparative advantages; coordinating skills training programs to build industrial workforce capacity; pooling resources to attract large-scale industrial investments requiring regional markets; promoting technology transfer and innovation through regional research centers; and developing regional industrial policies that provide coherent incentives and support systems.

6.3 Agriculture and Food Security

Agriculture remains fundamental to the Southeast economy, with each state possessing agricultural potentials in different crops and livestock. Regional cooperation could enhance agricultural productivity and food security through: Coordinated agricultural extension services sharing best practices and technologies; establishment of regional commodity marketing systems to ensure better prices for farmers; joint procurement of inputs like fertilizers and improved seeds to reduce costs; development of regional processing and storage facilities to reduce post-harvest losses; coordinated research on crop varieties suited to regional conditions and climate change adaptation; and establishment of regional agricultural colleges and training centers.

6.4 Infrastructure Development

Infrastructure development offers significant cooperation opportunities given that transportation networks, power generation and distribution, water systems, and digital connectivity transcend state boundaries. The

Southeast could benefit from coordinated infrastructure planning and financing, including: regional transportation masterplan integrating roads, railways, and airports; power generation and distribution initiatives that pool resources for independent power projects; water resource management cooperation, particularly for interstate rivers; broadband infrastructure deployment through joint public-private partnerships; and coordinated urban planning for metropolitan areas spanning multiple states like the Enugu-Onitsha corridor.

6.5 Security and Peace-Building

Addressing the security crisis requires regional cooperation beyond current fragmented efforts. Effective strategies should include: Joint security operations with unified command and intelligence sharing; community-based peace-building initiatives engaging youth, traditional leaders, and civil society across states; coordinated dialogue with aggrieved groups including structured engagement on legitimate grievances; establishment of regional peace and reconciliation commission to address historical grievances and promote healing; youth employment and empowerment programs to provide alternatives to violence; and harmonized security sector reform including advocacy for state police with regional coordination mechanisms.

6.6 Education and Human Capital Development

The Southeast's tradition of valuing education provides a foundation for regional cooperation in human capital

development: Establishment of centres of excellence in higher education with each state specializing in particular fields; student exchange programs promoting cross-state educational experiences; coordinated scholarship schemes for needy but brilliant students; joint vocational and technical education initiatives aligned with regional economic needs; research collaboration among regional universities on development challenges; and harmonization of curricula and quality standards to enhance educational outcomes.

6.7 Health and Social Services

Healthcare cooperation could improve access and quality while reducing costs:

Establishment of regional specialist hospitals and diagnostic centers that serve multiple states; coordination of disease surveillance and epidemic response; joint procurement of medicines and medical equipment to reduce costs; healthcare professional exchange programs and training; coordinated response to public health emergencies; and establishment of regional health insurance schemes.

6.8 Tourism and Cultural Promotion

The Southeast's rich cultural heritage, historical sites, and natural attractions offer tourism cooperation opportunities: Development of regional tourism circuits linking attractions across states; joint marketing of Southeast tourism destinations nationally and internationally; standardization of tourism regulations and hospitality standards; establishment of regional tourism training institutions;

organization of regional cultural festivals promoting Igbo heritage; and investment in tourism infrastructure including hotels, transportation, and attractions.

6.9 Technology and Innovation

Leveraging the Southeast's growing technology ecosystem, particularly in cities like Enugu, Aba, and Owerri: Establishment of regional technology hubs and innovation centers; coordinated ICT infrastructure development; support for technology startups through regional venture capital funds; promotion of digital skills training aligned with market demands; and development of e-governance platforms promoting transparency and efficiency.

7. Lessons from Successful Regional Cooperation Models

The Southeast can learn from successful regional cooperation experiences both within Nigeria and internationally.

7.1 The Lagos-Ogun Development Experience

Lagos and Ogun States have demonstrated effective cooperation in infrastructure development, particularly the Lagos-Badagry-Seme Expressway and light rail projects. This cooperation has been facilitated by geographic contiguity, economic complementarity, and political leadership commitment. The Southeast could adapt this model for the Enugu-Onitsha-Owerri corridor development.

7.2 The Asian Developmental State Model

While full replication may be impossible, the Southeast can adapt certain elements:

Long-term strategic planning focused on industrialization and economic transformation; merit-based bureaucracy with technical competence and autonomy; strategic public-private partnerships in development; investment in education and technical skills aligned with economic needs; and coordinated regional economic policies.

7.3 African Examples: Mauritius and Botswana

These African developmental state successes demonstrate that small states can achieve transformation through visionary leadership, institutional strength, strategic economic policies, good governance and rule of law, and long-term developmental orientation (Ofoma & Ibietan, 2025).

7.4 ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol

Despite current challenges, ECOWAS's facilitation of free movement of persons and goods within West Africa offers lessons for intra-regional mobility and trade facilitation that the Southeast could implement at the zone level.

8. Recommendations

Based on this analysis, the following recommendations are proposed for enhancing regional socio-economic cooperation and addressing leadership deficit in Southeast Nigeria:

8.1 Leadership and Institutional Reforms

Establishment of a Southeast Leadership Summit comprising all five governors, national assembly members from the

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zone, traditional rulers, religious leaders, and civil society representatives meeting quarterly to coordinate regional positions and policies. This summit should have a permanent secretariat with technical capacity for policy analysis and planning. Creation of a revitalized and empowered Southeast Development Commission with federal government support, modeled on successful development commissions but with stronger governance structures, adequate funding, clear mandate, and measurable performance indicators.

Institutionalization of merit-based appointments in civil services across Southeast states, with coordinated efforts to build professional, competent bureaucracies capable of driving development regardless of political transitions. Development of a 20-year Southeast Regional Development Plan with input from diverse stakeholders, covering infrastructure, industrialization, agriculture, human capital, and social development, with clear milestones and accountability mechanisms.

8.2 Security and Peace-Building

Intensification of dialogue with all stakeholders including IPOB leadership, security agencies, federal government, and affected communities, with the goal of addressing legitimate grievances while maintaining rule of law. The continued detention of Nnamdi Kanu despite court orders should be resolved as it has become a major obstacle to peace. Implementation of comprehensive security sector reforms including advocacy for state police with constitutional and legal backing,

professionalizing existing security agencies and holding them accountable for human rights abuses, and establishing community policing mechanisms with genuine local participation.

Launch of large-scale youth employment and empowerment programs targeting unemployed youth vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. Programs should focus on skills training, entrepreneurship support, and job creation in growth sectors. Establishment of a Southeast Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission to investigate human rights violations by all parties, provide justice for victims, and promote healing and reconciliation.

8.3 Economic Cooperation and Development

Creation of a Southeast Economic Cooperation Framework harmonizing commercial regulations, removing internal trade barriers, and facilitating business operations across state boundaries. Establishment of regional industrial parks and special economic zones with coordinated incentives, shared infrastructure, and governance structures attractive to investors. Development of regional agricultural value chains leveraging each state's comparative advantages, with joint investment in processing facilities, storage systems, and marketing platforms. Coordination of infrastructure development through a Regional Infrastructure Development Fund pooling resources from states, federal allocations, and private sector participation for transformative projects.

8.4 Social Development and Human Capital

Expansion of education cooperation through regional universities collaboration, student exchange programs, coordinated scholarship schemes, and vocational training aligned with regional economic needs. Strengthening healthcare systems through regional specialist centers, joint procurement systems, coordinated epidemic response, and health professional training programs. Implementation of comprehensive social protection programs cushioning the most vulnerable from economic hardships while building human capital for long-term development.

8.5 Governance and Accountability

Strengthening transparency and accountability through adoption of open governance platforms, publication of budgets and expenditure reports, citizen engagement in policy-making and monitoring, and independent performance evaluations. Combating corruption through regional anti-corruption initiatives, harmonized procurement procedures, protection of whistleblowers, and prosecution of corrupt officials. Promoting civic education to build citizens' understanding of rights, responsibilities, and mechanisms for holding leaders accountable.

8.6 External Engagement and Advocacy

Coordinated engagement with the federal government on issues affecting the Southeast, presenting united positions on appointments, projects, and resource allocation. Active participation

in national economic forums and development initiatives ensuring the Southeast's interests are adequately represented. Engagement with international development partners, private sector investors, and diaspora communities to mobilize resources and expertise for regional development.

9. Conclusion

The Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria stands at a critical juncture. Endowed with abundant human and natural resources, entrepreneurial energy, and significant economic potential, the region has paradoxically experienced profound development setbacks due primarily to leadership deficit and weak regional cooperation. As of 2025, the security crisis, economic hardships, infrastructure inadequacies, and political fragmentation have reached levels that threaten the region's future prosperity and social cohesion.

The estimated ₦7.6 trillion economic loss since 2021 due to insecurity and sit-at-home enforcement represents not just financial costs but shattered dreams, truncated education, disrupted businesses, and immense human suffering. The over 1,844 documented killings, countless disappearances, and pervasive fear have created a humanitarian crisis demanding urgent attention.

Yet the situation, however dire, is not irreversible. The Southeast has demonstrated throughout history its resilience, entrepreneurial spirit, and capacity for self-organization. The challenge lies in channeling these strengths through effective leadership,

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robust institutions, and coordinated regional cooperation toward sustainable development.

The Developmental State theory, while derived from East Asian experiences, offers valuable insights for the Southeast. It emphasizes that development is neither automatic nor inevitable but results from deliberate choices, strategic policies, capable institutions, and sustained commitment by visionary leadership. The theory highlights that market forces alone cannot drive transformation in developing contexts; strategic state intervention, guided by long-term developmental vision rather than short-term political calculations, is essential.

For the Southeast to realize its potential, several transformations must occur. First, political leadership must transcend partisan divisions, personal ambitions, and short-term calculations to embrace a shared regional developmental vision. This requires establishing effective coordination mechanisms, developing long-term plans with broad stakeholder buy-in, and building institutions capable of sustained implementation.

Second, the security crisis must be addressed comprehensively through dialogue, justice, security sector reform, youth empowerment, and addressing legitimate grievances while maintaining rule of law. Military operations alone cannot bring peace; political solutions involving all stakeholders are necessary.

Third, regional economic cooperation must move beyond rhetoric to concrete initiatives in trade facilitation, industrial

development, agricultural modernization, infrastructure development, and human capital investment. This requires pooling resources, harmonizing policies, and creating enabling environments for private sector participation.

Fourth, governance must become more transparent, accountable, and responsive to citizen needs. Corruption must be combated vigorously, public resources must be used efficiently for development purposes, and citizens must be genuinely engaged as partners in development rather than passive recipients of government services.

Fifth, the Southeast must engage constructively with the federal government and other regions while advocating for its fair share of national resources and political representation. This requires presenting united positions and demonstrating capacity to utilize resources effectively for development.

The path forward will not be easy. Entrenched interests benefiting from the status quo will resist change. Political calculations will tempt leaders to prioritize short-term gains over long-term development. Ethnic and partisan divisions will continue to pose challenges. Security threats will not disappear overnight. However, the alternative to concerted action is continued decline, deepening crisis, and the squandering of the Southeast's immense potential.

Nigeria's emergence as a BRICS partner country in 2024 signals new opportunities for economic cooperation

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and development financing through South-South frameworks (Valori, 2025). The African Development Bank's commitment of \$2.95 billion to Nigeria (2025-2030) with focus on infrastructure, youth employment, and agricultural transformation offers resources the Southeast can access through strategic positioning (AfDB, 2025). National economic reforms, despite their painful short-term impacts, are creating fiscal space for development investments if well utilized.

The Southeast must seize this moment to transform its trajectory. The region that once drove Nigeria's industrialization, produced renowned entrepreneurs and intellectuals, and demonstrated remarkable resilience can do so again. But this requires leadership that rises above mediocrity, institutions that function with competence and integrity, citizens that demand accountability while fulfilling civic responsibilities, and regional cooperation that turns potential into reality.

As Nigeria navigates its development challenges in 2025 and beyond, the Southeast's success or failure will significantly impact the nation's trajectory. A transformed, prosperous, and peaceful Southeast would contribute immensely to national development, demonstrate the possibility of regional cooperation, and provide a model for other regions. Conversely, continued crisis would drag down national progress and potentially destabilize the entire country.

The choice ultimately lies with Southeast leaders and citizens: continue

on the path of division, insecurity, and underdevelopment, or embrace the difficult but rewarding journey of unity, peace, and sustainable development. The resources, human capital, and potential exist. What is required is the will to act decisively, the wisdom to prioritize collective welfare over narrow interests, and the courage to make difficult but necessary changes. The time for action is now.

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