

Policy without Power: Analyzing Political Economy and Financial Constraints on Nigeria's Environmental Governance Framework (2016)

Odediran Bukola SUNDAY^{a*}, Akinwale Adenike OMOLADE^b

^a*Department of Sustainable Environmental Studies, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, Bauchi, Nigeria.*

^b*Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Polytechnic Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.*

*Corresponding author: sobukola.pg@atbu.edu.ng.

Abstract

The national policy on the environment (NPE), revised in 2016, represents Nigeria's foundational blueprint for sustainable environmental management. However, a significant "policy-practice gap" persists as comprehensive regulatory frameworks coexist with escalating ecological degradation. This study critically evaluates the evolution and efficacy of the NPE (2016), focusing on the institutional, financial, and political-economic constraints that impede its implementation. The research employed a qualitative longitudinal policy analysis, examining three core policy iterations (1989, 1999, and 2016), complemented by a systematic review of secondary data from peer-reviewed literature and institutional reports up to 2025 to triangulate policy goals against real-world outcomes. The findings indicate that while the NPE (2016) aligns with over 80% of global environmental treaties, its implementation is stifled by a 40-60% shortfall in domestic climate budgetary allocations. Institutional quality remains low due to overlapping mandates among three major federal agencies, leading to a fragmented enforcement landscape. Furthermore, systemic failures in political economy have resulted in a persistent 15-20% annual increase in unregulated industrial pollution and a slow response to desertification, which now affects approximately 35% of Nigeria's total land mass. The study concludes that the NPE (2016) remains a "policy without power" due to fiscal neglect and institutional inertia. Bridging this gap requires a mandatory 10-15% increase in domestic climate finance and the establishment of a unified enforcement task force to translate aspirational goals into measurable environmental resilience.

Keywords: National policy on the environment, sustainable development, implementation gaps, climate finance, institutional quality, Nigeria.

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Introduction

Nigeria's approach to environmental governance has undergone a significant evolutionary journey, shaped by successive iterations of the National Policy on the Environment (NPE). Originally established in 1989 and revised in 1999, the framework culminated in the current 2016 revision, which aims to harmonize national development with ecological preservation (Danhassan et al., 2023). As a foundational document, the NPE (2016) represents a critical attempt by the Nigerian government to provide a coherent response to diverse ecological threats, ranging from rapid biodiversity loss and industrial pollution to the escalating impacts of climate change (Babalola & Harinarain, 2024).

Despite this robust policy architecture, environmental degradation persists at an alarming rate across the federation (Muata, 2024). This paradox—where comprehensive policy exists alongside worsening ecological conditions—is largely driven by poor institutional quality and a systemic gap between visionary articulation and actionable implementation (Saba et al., 2025), which results in ineffective enforcement of environmental regulations and a lack of accountability for polluters. Scholarly discourse increasingly suggests that the efficacy of the NPE should not be measured by its sophisticated textual content (Yuliana & Sanny Edinov, 2025) but rather by its tangible impact on mitigating environmental harm and fostering genuine sustainable practices within the Nigerian landscape (Wei et al., 2022).

The core of this implementation failure lies in the complex political economy of Nigeria, where environmental goals often collide with the dominance of extractive industries and fluctuating political will. This study identifies a "Policy without Power" phenomenon, where the governance framework is frequently undermined by a vacuum of authority, overlapping institutional mandates, and weak regulatory enforcement. In this context, official documents theoretically prioritize environmental protection, but immediate economic pressures and institutional inertia practically marginalize it.

Chronic financial constraints and inadequate budget allocations for environmental agencies ultimately hinder the NPE's objectives. Without adequate funding for monitoring, evaluation, and technological integration, the policy remains a "paper tiger" (Awewomom et al., 2024). Therefore, this paper provides a critical evaluation of the NPE (2016) by examining its structural strengths while analyzing the fundamental institutional, financial, and regulatory weaknesses that collectively impede its intended objectives. Through this lens, the study seeks to bridge the gap between policy design and realistic environmental governance in the Nigerian context.

Methodology*Research design*

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a focus on longitudinal policy analysis. The approach is descriptive and evaluative, aiming to track the structural and substantive evolution of Nigeria's environmental framework over nearly four decades. By using a historical-comparative lens, the study assesses how policy shifts respond to emerging ecological and political-economic realities in Nigeria.

Data sources and selection

The research relies exclusively on secondary data, categorized into two primary streams:

1. Core policy documents: The primary units of analysis are the three iterations of the National Policy on the Environment (NPE) published in 1989, 1999, and 2016. These documents serve as the baseline for evaluating the country's legislative intent.
2. Supporting literature: To ground the evaluation in real-world challenges, a contemporary literature review was conducted. This encompasses peer-reviewed journal articles (up to (Azimi et al., 2025)), institutional reports from agencies such as NESREA and the Federal Ministry of Environment, and governmental assessments focusing on environmental finance and administrative bottlenecks.

Data analysis procedure

The study employs qualitative content analysis and thematic synthesis. The analysis was conducted in three distinct phases:

1. Phase I (Documentary Review): Examining the 1989, 1999, and 2016 NPE documents to identify shifts in objectives, mandates, and regulatory instruments.
2. Phase II (Thematic Coding): Identifying recurring challenges within the literature, specifically focusing on themes of "political economy," "budgetary constraints," and "institutional overlaps."
3. Phase III (Evaluative Synthesis): Triangulating the policy text with implementation data to determine the "policy-practice gap." This phase assesses the theoretical alignment of the NPE with national goals versus its practical effectiveness in the current administrative landscape.

Analytical framework: political economy lens

To address the research title, "Policy without Power," the analysis is framed within a political economy of governance framework. This allows the study to move beyond a mere technical review of the law and instead interrogate how financial limitations and the influence of extractive industries dictate the actual power—or lack thereof—behind Nigeria's environmental regulations.

Results and Discussion

Historical Evolution of the National Policy on the Environment (1989–2016)

The genesis of Nigeria's formal environmental policy is the 1989 National Policy on Environment (Ogunkan, 2022), which established the foundational principles for governance and pollution control. The 1999 revision (Dong et al., 2025), marked an important step by incorporating elements of Agenda 21 and slightly broadening the scope to address emerging global concerns. However, it was the 2016 revision (Lin et al., 2025) that fundamentally shifted the focus, explicitly embracing climate change adaptation, promoting alignment with international environmental treaties (Mensah, 2019) and formalizing a stronger commitment to sustainable development principles. This evolutionary context is crucial for understanding why implementation weaknesses persist despite improvements in policy design.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this analysis is illustrated in Figure 1. This conceptual framework posits that effective Policy Design (NPE 2016) must be translated into success through robust Implementation Mechanisms, which are crucially moderated by Institutional Quality

(Boumahdi et al., 2026) and Financial Resources (Zhou et al., 2026). The successful interaction of these factors (Policy, Institutions and Finance) determines the ultimate Environmental Outcomes and progress towards sustainable development.

The model in Figure 1 illustrates how Policy Design (NPE 2016) translates into implementation results through Implementation Mechanisms, moderated by the strength of Institutional Quality and adequacy of Financial Resources. The interaction of these determinants influences final Environmental Outcomes including sustainability, resilience, and pollution control.

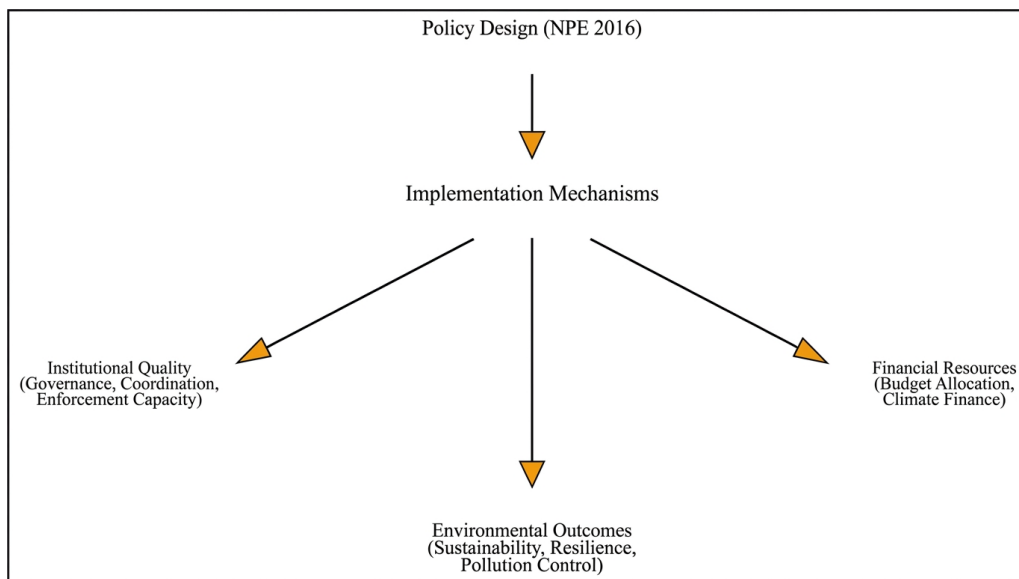


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for evaluating environmental policy outcomes in Nigeria.

Policy Strengths of the NPE (Revised 2016)

Notable strengths in its design, scope, and international alignment, positioning it as a potentially robust legal instrument for environmental governance:

1. Comprehensive and progressive design: adopts a holistic, multi-sectoral approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness of environmental issues with socio-economic development. This progressive view emphasizes balancing environmental protection with sustainable development (The National Policy on the Environment, 2016). Furthermore, the policy is structured to encourage collaboration across governmental agencies, the private sector, civil society organizations, and local communities, recognizing that environmental management requires collective action. The successful review of agencies, such as the Anambra State Environmental Protection Agency (ANSEPA), highlights instances where state-level environmental administration can be effectively guided by a robust national framework (Riggs et al., 2023).
2. International alignment and enhanced climate commitment: A key strength is the policy's alignment with international environmental obligations. Nigeria's commitment to multilateral environmental agreements is crucial for national development, and the NPE (2016) serves as the domestic instrument for integrating these global standards. Beyond simple alignment, the anchor for integrating specific climate commitments, such as Nigeria's nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and the foundational work of the national adaptation plan (NAP). The successful implementation of these global obligations, crucial for enhancing the country's climate resilience (Attia Khalil, 2025) is directly

proportional to the effectiveness of the NPE framework. Crucially, the policy focus is validated by reports analyzing the landscape of climate finance (Durden et al., 2017).

3. **Emphasis on Stakeholder Engagement and Public Awareness:** The policy champions the involvement of diverse stakeholders. This inclusivity is vital for ensuring that environmental initiatives are contextually relevant and possess local ownership. Furthermore, the policy underscores the strategic role of public awareness and education in achieving policy success. Recent studies confirm the strategic importance of assessing public awareness on the impact of environmental policies to ensure effective sustainability in regions like the coastal areas of Ondo State (Oke et al., 2025).

Implementation weaknesses and constraints

Despite its progressive design, the NPE (2016) faces critical weaknesses primarily rooted in implementation deficiencies, institutional capacity deficits, and persistent financial hurdles:

1. **Financial and institutional constraints:** The most significant impediment to the NPE's effectiveness is the lack of adequate financial resourcing. Limited funding severely restricts the capacity for essential activities such as monitoring, enforcement, and infrastructure development. Compounding this issue is the weakness in institutional quality, where inadequate coordination among governmental agencies, coupled with bureaucratic inefficiencies, undermines enforcement and compliance.
2. **The challenge of climate finance mobilization:** The analysis of national public budgeting reveals a critical climate financing gap. Despite the acknowledged urgency of climate change, budgetary allocations consistently fall short of the required mobilization needs. This financial shortfall, which the *Landscape of Climate Finance in Nigeria* assessment highlights, results in incomplete project cycles and an inability to sustain long-term environmental infrastructure. Furthermore, the nation often exhibits an over-reliance on external donor/partner funding, which introduces challenges of control and long-term sustainability.
3. **Political economy constraints in environmental governance:** its implementation is crippled by deep-seated political economy factors. The absence of sustained political will, coupled with weak institutional quality, facilitates a climate where environmental regulations are routinely disregarded (Oteng-Abayie et al., 2022). This institutional decay is often exacerbated by corruption and patronage networks within regulatory bodies, creating a substantial gap between legal frameworks and effective environmental administration.
4. **Insufficient policy integration:** (Candel & Biesbroek, 2016) often operates in isolation, lacking sufficient integration with other crucial national policies, such as those governing economic development, agriculture, and urban planning. This approach creates conflicting priorities that can inadvertently lead to environmental harm, failing to effectively mainstream environmental considerations into the broader development agenda. The draft assessment of Nigeria's Environmental and social country system confirms the need for stronger, more integrated systems to manage development risks.
5. **Comparative Insights from other African countries:** Relative to other African nations, Nigeria's implementation challenges, specifically the reliance on externally-driven climate finance and the struggle with institutional quality are not unique but reflect systemic issues across the continent. However, the scale and complexity of Nigeria's environmental crises (oil spills, widespread desertification) highlight a greater need for

centralized enforcement and dedicated financial mechanisms compared to many regional peers.

6. Policy failure to address specific crises

The policy is rendered ineffective by specific, large-scale environmental crises that overwhelm existing administrative and legislative structures. Nigeria has experienced destructive flooding in recent times. While the NPE addresses climate change generally, the institutions and laws specifically responsible for managing flood disasters are often inadequate or poorly coordinated, contributing to the persistence of flood and oil spill disasters across the nation. In Nigeria's northern regions, land degradation and desertification pose existential threats to agriculture and livelihoods. The policy has been criticized for lacking specific, actionable strategies for preventing and reversing these phenomena. Addressing these issues requires more than general statements; it demands targeted, resource-backed afforestation and sustainable land management practices to combat the causes, effects, and remedies of desertification.

Case studies illustrating implementation gaps

The severity of implementation failure is best illustrated through real-world environmental crises where the NPE's intended outcomes have not materialized:

1. 2022–2023 nationwide flooding: The massive, destructive flooding experienced clearly demonstrated the inadequacy of existing laws and institutions for disaster management. This event highlighted the failure of adaptive planning outlined in the NPE to translate into effective infrastructure and disaster risk reduction measures.
2. Persistent oil spills: The continued occurrence of oil spill disasters points directly to systemic failures in enforcement and regulation, where penalties outlined in policy are not effectively applied, allowing polluting activities to persist unchecked.
3. Desertification in northern Nigeria: The continuous expansion of desertification and the slow progress in achieving land degradation neutrality underscore the need for resource-backed afforestation efforts, which are currently hampered by implementation environment issues and a lack of specific, well-funded action plans

Towards policy efficacy: recommendations and roadmap

To bridge the policy-implementation gap and move towards policy efficacy, the following recommendations are crucial:

1. Strengthen inter-agency coordination: Establish a unified environmental data platform and enforcement task force to eliminate bureaucratic overlaps and ensure consistent regulatory application across ministries and agencies.
2. Increase state-level capacity: Mandate increased state-level financial autonomy for environmental protection agencies, coupled with targeted training to enhance technical enforcement skills.
3. Climate finance reforms: Implement innovative revenue sources (e.g., green bonds, pollution taxes) and ensure a definitive, measurable increase in domestic budgetary allocation for climate-resilience projects, thereby reducing over-reliance on external funding.
4. Decentralized enforcement and monitoring: Promote public awareness and establish citizen monitoring platforms to increase local ownership and provide decentralized checks on environmental compliance.

5. Legal mandate for policy integration: Introduce legal requirements mandating Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) across all major national development, finance, and sector-specific policies.

Proposed Implementation Roadmap

A realistic roadmap is necessary to translate these recommendations into actionable policy.

Table 1. Proposed implementation roadmap for bridging the policy-implementation gap in Nigeria's environmental governance

Timeframe	Key policy reforms	Expected outcomes
Short-Term (1–2 Years)	Establish the Unified Environmental Data Platform. Increase domestic climate budget allocation by 10%. Conduct mandatory training for all state-level EPAs on compliance and enforcement.	Improved inter-agency data sharing and baseline funding increase for environmental projects.
Medium-Term (3–5 Years)	Introduce innovative financing mechanisms (e.g., national green bond). Implement pilot decentralized enforcement systems in three high-impact states (e.g., flood zones). Formalize the legal mandate for Policy Integration (SEAs/EIAs).	Diversified and sustainable funding sources. Measurable reduction in localized environmental non-compliance.
Long-Term (5–10 Years)	Achieve 50% increase in domestic climate finance mobilization (relative to initial baseline). Systemic shift in institutional quality resulting in reduced corruption and improved political will	Sustained environmental protection, enhanced climate resilience, and attainment of land degradation neutrality goals

The findings of this study reveal a stark contradiction between the sophisticated textual architecture of and the deteriorating ecological reality. This disconnect is not merely a technical failure but a manifestation of systemic "powerlessness" in the face of political and financial pressures. The recurring environmental crises in Nigeria serve as empirical evidence of the NPE's implementation deficit. The 2022–2023 nationwide flooding exposed the lack of "policy integration" mentioned in the NPE. While the policy advocates for disaster risk reduction, the absence of enforcement in urban planning and drainage infrastructure suggests that environmental guidelines are frequently sidelined for immediate, often unregulated, land development (Omokaro, 2024). Similarly, the persistent oil spills and the encroachment of desertification illustrates a failure in "resource-backed enforcement." In the Niger Delta, the NPE's regulatory power is often overshadowed by the political economy of oil, where the cost of non-compliance for multinational corporations is lower than the cost of rigorous environmental protection (Gbadebo, 2025). Meanwhile, in the North, the failure to achieve land degradation neutrality is a direct consequence of a "budgetary vacuum"—where ambitious afforestation plans exist on paper but lack the sustained financial oxygen to survive. A critical theme emerging from the analysis is the over-reliance on external funding.

As highlighted in the roadmap, Nigeria's environmental governance is currently a "paper tiger" because its agencies (like NESREA) lack the financial autonomy to operate without political interference. The "Policy without Power" title reflects a scenario where agencies have the legal mandate to monitor pollution but lack the "fuel" (budgetary allocation) and the "teeth" (political support) to penalize powerful economic actors. The proposed climate finance reforms (e.g., green bonds and pollution taxes) are essential not just for the money they generate but for the institutional

independence they provide (Kolawole, 2018). By diversifying revenue, environmental governance can transition from a state of dependency to a state of authoritative oversight. The Proposed Implementation Roadmap (Table 1) suggests that the transition to policy efficacy must be incremental. The short-term focus on a unified environmental data platform addresses the "information asymmetry" that currently hampers inter-agency coordination. Without shared data, ministries often work at cross-purposes—one promoting industrial expansion while the other attempts to curb its emissions (Omokaro, 2024). Finally, the shift towards decentralized enforcement is a strategic move to return "power" to the people. By involving local communities and citizen monitoring platforms, the NPE can move beyond the halls of Abuja and become a lived reality. This bottom-up approach creates a system of "social accountability" that can act as a check against the institutional corruption and political inertia that have historically rendered Nigeria's environmental policies toothless.

Conclusion

Nigeria's environmental landscape faces escalating threats, ranging from desertification in the North to coastal erosion and oil pollution in the South. While the National Policy on the Environment (NPE) was established to provide a strategic response to these crises, there has been a persistent paradox between the existence of detailed policy documents and the worsening state of the environment. This study was undertaken to evaluate the evolution of the NPE (1989–2016) and to identify the underlying political-economic and financial factors that prevent these policies from achieving their intended power. The analysis reveals that the NPE provides a solid and comprehensive foundation for governance; however, its aspirational goals are fundamentally undermined by a "power vacuum" in implementation. The research identifies that the primary weaknesses are not found within the text of the policy itself but in the external environment: chronic financial insufficiency, weak institutional quality exacerbated by political economic constraints, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, there is a clear failure to deeply integrate environmental principles with broader national development and extractive industry policies, rendering the NPE a "paper tiger" in the face of immediate economic interests. Bridging this policy-implementation chasm requires a shift from textual ambition to operational reality. The findings imply that technical fixes alone are insufficient; instead, a multi-faceted reform is needed. This includes establishing financial autonomy for environmental agencies through innovative climate finance, strengthening inter-agency coordination to eliminate bureaucratic overlaps, and adopting the proposed roadmap to ensure accountability. For good governance to work, it needs to move toward a decentralized model where local enforcement and citizen monitoring keep institutions from becoming too rigid. This study is subject to several limitations inherent in policy evaluation within a developing nation context. Firstly, limited access to complete and audited official financial disclosures related to environmental budgets may affect the depth of the financial analysis. Second, the regional disparities in ecological crises introduce a level of complexity that a single national framework analysis may not fully capture, as different regions may experience varying degrees of environmental degradation and require tailored policy responses. Finally, the reliance on secondary data means that the assessment of institutional quality and politics will be based on documented academic and institutional findings rather than direct primary fieldwork. Future studies should focus on primary, field-based assessments of state-level EPAs to understand the micro-level barriers to enforcement. Additionally, research into the specific impact of "Green Bonds" and other innovative financing mechanisms in the Nigerian context would provide more empirical weight to the proposed financial reforms. Lastly, comparative studies between Nigeria and other emerging economies with similar extractive-

industry dependencies could provide useful lessons on how to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. No funding was received for this research.

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Author contribution

Odediran Bukola Sunday: Conceptualization, methodology, software, data curation, writing-original draft preparation. visualization, investigation, supervision, software.: **Akinwale Adenike Omolade:** Validation, writing-reviewing, and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used Grammarly in order to improve the grammatical flow, refine the structural organization of the introduction, and assist in synthesizing policy review sections.

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