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Article

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### A CRITIQUE OF KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC POLICY FORMULATION IN NIGERIA

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#### Abstract

This paper critically assessed Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative as an ethical framework for socio-economic policy formulation in Nigeria. In Nigeria, it has been observed that, some previous socio-economic policies failed due to the problems of nepotism and weak institutions. This created a foundational ethical dilemma on the side of policy formulations and implementers. Thus, this paper sort to solve the problem with the instrumentality of Immanuel Kant Categorical Imperative. The study employed philosophical methods of prescription, critique and analysis to critically examine data gotten from Nigeria's recent policy initiatives, National Development Plan (2021–2025), and the Renewed Hope Plan of President Bola Tinubu (2026–2030). Finding in this study revealed that the Nigeria socio-economic policy formulation is still at the crossroad. It is weakened by persistent policy inconsistencies, nepotism, and poor accountability mechanisms and institution. The paper welcome certain reforms such as the social investment programme to alleviate poverty; and recommended that, the integration of Immanuel Kant Imperatives into policy formulations and implementations would stimulate treating citizens as ends in themselves and weigh policies in the eye of becoming universal laws for the good of all. This in the opinion of the paper would decisively deal with the problem of policy inconsistency, weak institutions and nepotism as well as strengthen socio-economic policy formulations in Nigeria, prioritize transparency, and inspire a duty-based governance culture for even development.

**Keywords:** Categorical Imperative, Nepotism, Nigeria, Policy Formulation, Socio-economics, Renewed Hope.

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## **Introduction**

Socio-economic policy formulation is a central task of governance in modern state. It, determines the allocation of resources, the distribution of opportunities, and the mechanisms for addressing unemployment, poverty and insecurity. In Nigeria, participants observation has revealed that, socio-economic policy has long been shaped by structural challenges such as corruption, nepotism, and weak institutions. These socio-ethical challenges undermine the country's ability to deliver equitable development and worsen social security and illuminates the moral deficits in Nigeria's policy frameworks. It highlights how Nigerian policies often failed the universality test owing to few privileges political elites and capitalists controlling the vast resources at the expense of collective welfare, thereby reproducing wider socio-economic inequality and social dissatisfaction. In recent times, Nigeria's policy initiatives, such as the National Development Plan (2021–2025) and the Renewed Hope Plan (2026–2030), reflect attempts to addressing pressing socio-economic concerns such as unemployment, food insecurity, housing deficits, and weak human capital development. These initiatives also aim to align with the long-term Nigeria Agenda 2050, which envisions Nigeria at a top global economy by mid-century. Yet, despite ambitious goals, persistence of corruption, nepotism, and institutional fragility raise questions about the ethical coherence and practical justice of these policies to see the light of the day.

In view of the above background, this paper opines that, Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative which is a rigorous moral philosophical structure offers the needed universality framework, viz: respect for human dignity and governance rooted in rational duty . these imperatives have the capacity to address the problem of policy inconsistency and other challenges confronting Nigeria's socio-economic policy formulation. As a deontological ethic, Kant's framework does not measure morality by outcomes or utility but by the moral worth of the principles guiding action. Applying this framework to Nigeria's policy environment allows for a critical interrogation of whether policies reflect universal principles of justice or are corrupted by self-interest and partiality. Kant's insistence on treating humanity always as an end and never merely as a means presents a valuable lens for evaluating whether Nigerian citizens are genuinely the focus of policy or exploited for political and economic gain. The central aim of this paper therefore is to provide a critique of Nigeria's socio-economic policies formulation through the lens of Kant's categorical imperative. Applying Kant's principles into the policy formulation seeks to provide the requires ethical commitment to sustain institutional reforms that prioritize accountability, transparency, and the dignity of all citizens. The intention of the paper is to bridge philosophy and practice by demonstrating how Kantian ethics can illuminate moral failures of Nigerian socio-economic policy formulation while offering pathways for sustainable reform. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates about governance, policy formulation and the role of moral philosophy in political life.

## **Background to Immanuel Kant's Categorical Thought**

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was one of the most influential moral Philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), he introduced the categorical imperative as the supreme principle of morality, binding on all rational beings regardless of personal desires or outcomes. His categorical imperative commands acting universally and unconditionally. He prescribed a duty for everyone to obey without exception. According to him, one must act only in ways that could be willed the action becomes a universal law, (John,2017, P. 167) opined that "Kant maxims is a philosophical version of Golden Rule" That is, do unto others what you wish would be done to you. Kant

categorical thought is divided into three principal formulations: The Universal Law, which requires that one act only according to maxims that could be willed universally without contradiction. It is universal in the sense that, whatever is right for one person to do is right for everybody. In the same manner, whatever is morally wrong for one person to do is wrong for all. Hence, his maxim “Act only on the maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant, 2019. P. 422). This implies that corrupt or self-serving policies have no place in socio-economic and governance by Kant’s standard.

The second is treating humanity as an End. Kant insists that individuals be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means. He forbids an individual being used as a tool or instrument for achieving a particular goal. By this this, man’s exploitation or inhumanity by another man is morally wrong. Policies and policy makers, therefore, must uphold the dignity of citizens rather than exploit them for political advantage. The third, is acting from the sense of duty. That is to say the moral law by Kant does not depend on what we want, desire or like but on what we ought to do. That means if the moral law which is a universal obligate a moral command for all to obey, it must necessarily follow that individual has it as duty to carry out the obligation. “This principle calls for participatory governance , rule of law, transparent institutions that promote collective autonomy and justice without fear or favour” (Wood 2008, P. 89). Altogether, Kant (2019) posits that there is only one categorical imperative. That is the imperative of act only on the maxim universal law. It evaluates moral worth of actions not by the consequences the action produces but by the intention behind the action guided wholly by duty and reason. Kant distinguishes between two basic kinds of imperatives: the categorical imperative and hypothetical. The categorical imperative here refers to unconditional, intentional actions unlike hypothecal imperatives which are conditional and commands a person to do a thing as a means to an end. Kant’s categorical imperative creates a moral test for policy formulation by evaluating its universalizability, and respect for human dignity.

### **Socio-economic Policy Formulation in Nigeria**

The term “Socio-economic” refers to the study of the relationship between social and economic factors. It looks at how society through social structures, cultural values, and institutions shape economic behaviour and how the economic system in turn affect social life. Smelser (2005) defined it as how the economic phenomena are embedded in social structures, norm, networks and institution. The applications of this term are broad and deeply relevant to contemporary challenges. It provides a framework for analyzing poverty, inequality, and development by showing how social barriers such as class, gender, and ethnicity, political party affiliation, etc, affect economic opportunities. The analysis of it also helps policymaking, particularly in areas of resource allocation to balance inequality, injustice, etc, in the design of policies and execution to address issues like education, healthcare, and environmental sustainability to promote not just economic growth but also social cohesion and well-being. In this way, socio-economics bridges the gap between technical economics and moral, cultural, and political realities of society. In Nigeria, socio-economics formulation refers to the design and implementation of policies that attempt to balance economic growth with the social needs of its diverse population. This process is shaped by the country’s historical, political, and cultural contexts, which often influence the direction of development strategies. Dye’s (2017, P.35). general concept of policy formulation as “the development of appropriate courses of action for addressing public problems” applies directly to Nigeria’s attempts to tackle poverty, unemployment, and inequality through integrated policies. Nigerian socio-economics formulation has therefore

evolved as a response to pressing challenges such as rapid population growth, dependence on oil revenues, regional inequalities, and persistent poverty.

### **Historical Context of Policy Formulation in Nigeria**

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has pursued various socio-economic development frameworks designed to address poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The Early post-independence plans, such as the First National Development Plan (1962–1968) had sought to accelerate industrialization and infrastructure growth. However, political instability and military coups disrupted continuity, weakening the impact of these early efforts (Ekpo 2018, P. 14). During the 1980s, the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), imposed under the influence of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, shifted policy toward liberalization and austerity. While intended to stabilize the economy, SAP deepened social inequalities, eroded public welfare, and exposed the fragility of Nigeria's institutions (Ogwumike 2005, P. 322). Subsequent democratic governments attempted corrective measures, introducing poverty alleviation schemes such as the Poverty Eradication Programme (2000) and the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS, 2004–2007). Despite their rhetoric of inclusivity and growth, these policies suffered performance failures under the weight of corruption, poor implementation, and elite capture (Akinola 2017, P. 97). The 2010's marked another shift with Vision 20:20:20, which sought to position Nigeria among the world's top 20 economies by 2020. This ambition was undermined by declining oil revenues, security crises, and institutional weaknesses. In 2021, the government launched the National Development Plan (2021–2025) with emphasis on job creation, infrastructure, and human capital development. Yet, as in previous decades, implementation challenges and governance deficits persisted (Eboh 2022, P. 44).

### **Contemporary Policy Frameworks**

**The National Development Plan (2021–2025):** focused on diversifying the economy beyond oil dependence, investing in critical infrastructure, and strengthening social protection. Its objectives include creating 21 million full-time jobs and lifting 35 million people out of poverty by 2025 (Federal Ministry of Finance 5). However, weak institutional capacity, limited fiscal space, and pervasive corruption tend to hinder its implementation. Critics argue that while the NDP's goals were laudable, they failed to materialize into substantive outcomes due to systemic governance deficits (Okonjo-Iweala 2018, P. 212).

**The Renewed Hope Agenda (2023):** under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the Renewed Hope Agenda was introduced in 2023, framing socio-economic policy around eight priority areas: food security, poverty eradication, economic growth, access to capital, job creation, security, rule of law, and anti-corruption. The agenda highlighted the urgency of addressing inflation, foreign exchange instability, and unemployment. Initiatives such as the Renewed Hope Housing Programme and the Renewed Hope Health Connect Committee were launched to improve housing and healthcare access (Federal Ministry of Works 7).

**The Renewed Hope Plan (2026–2030):** approved by the National Economic Council in 2025, the Renewed Hope Plan (RHP 2026–2030) is designed as a medium-term successor to the NDP and as a bridge to Nigeria Agenda 2050. Its headline goal is to accelerate Nigeria's economy toward a \$1 trillion GDP by 2030 (State House 3). The plan emphasizes continuity of reforms, massive infrastructure investment, job creation, food security, housing,

healthcare, and institutional strengthening. However, the ambitious scope raises questions about feasibility given fiscal constraints and governance challenges. These formulations reflect Mkandawire's (2004, P. 17). argument that "social policy must be deliberately integrated into economic strategies to foster inclusive development" However, Nigeria's socio-economic formulations often face implementation challenges due to weak institutions, corruption, and policy discontinuity. But empirical observation revealed that, socio-economics policy formulation in Nigeria cannot be divorced from politics. Ake stressed that "development in Africa is essentially a political and social process, not merely an economic one" (Ake 1996, P.32). In Nigeria, political patronage, ethnic balancing, and governance structures often shape the design and execution of socio-economic policies. For example, subsidy reforms, power sector restructuring, and poverty alleviation programmes are frequently contested because they affect different social groups unequally. Thus, socio-economics formulation in Nigeria is not just about technical policy design but also about negotiating the balance between economic reforms and social justice. For Nigeria to achieve meaningful development, its socio-economic formulations must move beyond rhetoric and ensure effective implementation that addresses inequality, promotes inclusiveness, and strengthens institutions.

### **Evaluation of Kant Categorical Imperative and Nigeria's Socio-economic Policy Formulation**

Kant's Categorical Imperative is one of the influential ethical theories that guide human actions and policy formulation. It has some limitations and criticism. The categorical imperative focuses on the intention of an action instead of the consequences. There are many situational consequences of an actions which can be more damaging than the intention. For instance, if telling the truth would lead to someone's death, Kant insists that one must tell the truth, for lying cannot be universalized. This is morally rigid and cannot be practiced. It is in conflict with the two reality duties. Such as duty to tell the truth and duty to protect an innocent life. Kant provided no priority on which duty to forego for another. Moreover, Kant's categorical ignores human relationship by advocating for treatment of all persons as autonomous rational and equal. In reality, no one is self sufficient and an independent agent that can succeed all by himself. We all belong to a family, have desire for friendship, to love and be loved. Kant's categorical imperative assumes the possibility of universal principles binding on all rational beings. The universality test can be vague. It can be interpreted differently by different people as he didn't formulate how to measure the maxim of universal actions. What is seen in one clime as morally binding may not be the case in another clime. Hence, different people may justify different actions under the same rule. For instance, Nigeria is characterized by ethnic, religious, and cultural pluralism that complicates the search for a single universalizable moral standard. The policies on resource allocation such as oil revenue distribution are contested along ethnic and regional lines, with different groups advancing divergent claims of justice. Kant's abstract universalism therefore, often fails to account for these contextual realities, where compromise and negotiation, rather than rigid universality, may be required for stability.

Furthermore, the categorical imperative emphasizes duty and rationality but pays little attention to material constraints. The theory over emphasizes rationality. For Kant, human actions and decisions must be always guided by reason. But, reason alone, does not influence one's decision. People are often influenced by their emotions, culture and experiences. Thus, the theory tends to recognize that experiences, situational factors, and emotions also influence one's action. Nigeria faces extreme poverty, high unemployment, and widespread inequality. Policymakers may find themselves compelled to adopt pragmatic

strategies that compromise strict ethical principles in order to secure survival and stability. For instance, fuel subsidy policies have often been retained despite being economically inefficient, because their removal risks massive social unrest (Olawale, 2021). Kantian formalism offers little flexibility for navigating such pragmatic dilemmas, making it appear detached from Nigerian socio-economic realities. However, Categorical imperative presupposes that rational agents are capable of acting from duty rather than inclination. In Nigeria, the entrenched culture of corruption and patronage politics means that leaders are often motivated by self-interest rather than moral duty. Even when policies are ethically sound on paper, their implementation is undermined by rent-seeking behaviour (Okonjo-lweala 2018). The categorical imperative lacks mechanisms to ensure compliance in contexts where institutional weakness and moral failure dominate. This raises doubts about its practical applicability in societies where duty is routinely subordinated to personal gain.

Kant's duty-based ethics emphasize acting according to principles that can be willed universally across time. In Nigeria, however, short-termism and policy discontinuity are the norm. Successive governments often abandon or rebrand their predecessor's programmes for political reasons, undermining long-term development. For example, Vision 20:20:20 was discarded without serious accountability, despite its ambitious goals (Eboh, 2020). Kant's framework highlights the ethical failure of such inconsistency, but it offers no clear solution to political cycles and the instrumentalization of policy for partisan ends. Generally, Kant's approach assumes a perfect moral world where everyone behaves from the point of duty without considering human weaknesses, emotions, and culture differences thereby making his categorical theory too idealistic to guide a universal moral life he was advocating. Moreover, a critical assessment of Nigeria socio-economic policy formulation, revealed that, despite successive frameworks, Nigeria's socio-economic policy environment is marred by recurring structural challenges such as wide spread corruption which undermines resource allocation and policy execution. Development funds are frequently diverted, projects inflated, or abandoned, eroding public trust in governance (Transparency International 2023). Nepotism and Patronage Politics with respect to employment opportunities and access to resources revealed favouritism along ethnic, religious, or partisan lines rather than merit. These practices violate the principles of fairness and universality (Aiyede, 2019). Weak Institutions - the Nigerian state suffers from fragile institutions incapable of enforcing accountability or sustaining reforms. Regulatory capture, weak judicial enforcement, and politicized bureaucracies limit the transformative potential of even well-designed policies (Suberu, 2020). Policy Discontinuity - Frequent changes in political leadership result in abrupt policy shifts, with new administrations discarding or rebranding earlier initiatives. This erodes long-term planning and wastes resources (Ekpo, 2018).

### **The Way Forward**

Kant's categorical imperative, with its emphasis on universality, human dignity, and duty, offers a valuable ethical lens for rethinking Nigeria's socio-economic policy challenges. Applied to governance, this framework provides normative guidance that can address corruption, nepotism, weak institutions, and policy inconsistency. The first formulation of the categorical imperative requires that one act only according to maxims that can be universalized without contradiction. Corruption whether embezzlement, bribery, or fraud cannot be universalized, since a society where everyone steals collapses into distrust and dysfunction. If public officials internalized this principle, corruption would be rejected as morally incoherent. Embedding the categorical imperative into governance would require policies that demand absolute integrity in resource allocation and institutional oversight

(Okonjo-Iweala, 2018). The second principle demands that individuals be treated as ends, not merely as means. Nepotism and patronage politics instrumentalize citizens, reducing them to tools for political advantage. Kant's framework insists that appointments, resource distribution, and policy benefits must respect the inherent dignity of all Nigerians. This principle justifies transparent, merit-based recruitment in public institutions and equitable resource allocation across ethnic and regional divides (Suberu, 2020).

Kant's categorical imperative emphasizes duty rather than consequence. For public officials, this means policy formulation and implementation should not be based on personal interest or political expediency but on adherence to duty to the law, constitution, and citizens. Such a culture of duty strengthens institutions like the judiciary, legislature, and anti-corruption agencies, reducing susceptibility to manipulation or capture (Aiyede, 2019 ). Kant places high moral value on promise-keeping and consistency. Nigeria's frequent policy discontinuities violate this principle, undermining trust and weakening long-term development agendas. The categorical imperative demands that leaders design policies as if they must be consistently upheld across administrations. This can encourage constitutional safeguards for continuity in socio-economic frameworks such as the Renewed Hope Plan (Eboh, 2020). Although Kant's categorical imperative is not directly a theory of distributive justice, Kant's insistence on respecting human dignity implies, policies must safeguard the autonomy of all citizens. Poverty, unemployment, and inadequate healthcare undermine autonomy by reducing individuals' ability to act as rational agents. Policies that prioritize poverty reduction, universal education, and equitable healthcare thus align with Kant's moral demand to respect citizens as rational beings with intrinsic worth.

Finally, Kant's categorical imperative encourages a governance culture rooted in moral example. Leaders are obligated to act as moral agents whose conduct sets universalizable standards for society. This is particularly relevant for Nigeria, where leadership failure has historically normalized corruption and weakened civic trust. A categorical imperative approach would require leaders to embody honesty, fairness, and duty, thereby reshaping societal values toward accountability and ethical responsibility (Adebanwi, 2017). Categorical imperative demands more than good intentions; it requires that policy be constructed on principles that could be universally endorsed and that uphold the moral worth of all individuals. A just society, in Kant's sense, is not merely one with benevolent rulers but one in which institutions are structured to embody universal laws of justice. This resonates with Nigeria's challenge of building strong, accountable institutions capable of implementing equitable socio-economic policies. The categorical imperative thus provides not only a critique of existing practices but also a guiding ideal for institutional reform and governance. Kant's insistence on universality, human dignity, and duty offers a demanding moral standard for governance, requiring that policies be designed as if they could serve as universal laws and that every citizen be treated as an end rather than a means. When applied to Nigeria's policy environment, particularly within frameworks such as the Renewed Hope Agenda, the analysis reveals a significant moral deficit. While certain objectives such as poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, and social welfare expansion reflect universalizable goals, the persistence of nepotism in governance, patronage politics, and fragile institutional enforcement compromises their ethical legitimacy. The paper, therefore, highlights the urgent need for ethical reform.

### **Recommendations**

The study therefore make the following recommendations:

- i. Poverty alleviation programmes, social protection, and infrastructure development should align with the principle of treating citizens as ends in themselves.
- ii. Persistent policy inconsistencies, favouritism, and weak accountability mechanisms and institution need to be decisively dealt with by policy makers to give its' ethical legitimacy.
- iii. Kantian principles of universality be embedded in the socio-economic policy formulations to strengthen institutions, prioritise transparency, and stimulate a duty-based governance culture that resists corruption and nepotism.

### **Conclusion**

This study critically examined the application of Kant's categorical imperative to socio-economic policy formulation in Nigeria. Although the Nigeria socio-economic policy is marred with corruption, nepotism, and weak institutions, The study concludes that the categorical imperative remains a valuable evaluative tool for policy formulation. By aligning this principle with Rawlsian fairness, and African communitarian solidarity, Nigeria socio-economic policies will not be merely a philosophical aspiration but a practical necessity for achieving justice, stability, and prosperity for all Nigerians in the Nigeria states. The integration of these ethical approaches points toward a hybrid model of policy formulation that can overcome entrenched corruption, nepotism, and institutional weakness. By strengthening institutions, embedding transparency, ensuring distributive justice, and building communal participation into policy-making, Nigeria can gradually align its socio-economic frameworks with the universal moral principles required for just and sustainable development.

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