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Article

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STATE POLICING AND INTERNAL SECURITY GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATION FOR THE ATTAINMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

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Abstract

In recent times, Nigeria's centralized internal security structure, particularly its federal policing system, has come under intense spotlight due to its inability to combat the various security challenges confronting the nation since 1999. Going by the peculiar nature of the Nigerian federalism, some scholars have argued that a centralized security architecture may hinder operational flexibility, quick tactical response and citizen's engagement needed to tackle local security threats. The major thrust of this paper, therefore, is to interrogate the nexus between state policing arrangement, internal security governance and the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria. Using the Structural Functionalism and Decentralization Theories as premise, the paper posits that in consonance with the principles of federalism, the Nigerian state may appear matured for the adoption of state policing system; however, conscientious effort must be taken to accommodate and uphold the tenets of political neutrality and constitutionality by the supervisory authorities. In terms of research methodology, the paper adopts the qualitative and analytical approach in examining the subject matter; and concludes with concrete policy recommendations that includes genuine constitutional reforms, pragmatic oversight framework, as well as institutional capacity-building in Nigeria's internal security governance system in order to achieve its SDGs goal.

Keywords: Federalism, State Policing, Security Governance, Security Reforms, and Sustainable Development Goals.

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Introduction

Since the advent of the Fourth Republic in 1999, the issue of restructuring the Nigerian policing system has been on the front burners of national discourse, especially within the context of its federal system of government. Though the current centralized internal security architecture was an aftermath of the military intervention of 1966, however, many stakeholders have argued that this disproportionately skewed arrangement negates the principles of federalism which ordinarily allows sub-national entities some level of autonomy over security governance (Dawson, 2015). According to Abubakar (2021), over the years, Nigeria's centralized internal security framework has not only undermined operational efficiency, local intelligence gathering capability, as well as its emergency response system; it has also affected mutual trust, and community engagement which has incapacitated the state's ability to tackle the country's growing security challenges. This scenario has led to the various high incidents of criminalities threatening the corporate existence of the Nigerian federation.

Consequently, due to the inadequate capacity of the Nigerian Police Force to perform its statutory role, as a result of paucity of personnel, weak combat readiness, as well as the reliance on obsolete equipment, the military has often been saddled with the task of internal security engagement. These unusual arrangements have systematically blurred the line between purely police-civilian duties and core military responsibilities which Newelly (2006) described as the undue militarization of the polity. According to a BusinessDay (2024) report, Nigeria is currently ranked amongst the most under-policed states in the world. With a population of over 200 million people, and a police force of about 370,000 personnel; Nigeria's police-to-population ratio stands at approximately 1:700 which is a far cry from the United Nations recommended ratio of 1:450 persons. This shortage in manpower coupled with logistical and institutional constraints, has contributed significantly to the inability of the Nigerian Police Force in combating violent crimes and criminality across the federation.

Furthermore, scholars of federalism, like Nwabueze (1992) and Jinadu (1982) have argued that decentralized policing model are common features in heterogeneous federations, including that of Canada, Brazil, Australia and United States. In these polities, sub-national authorities maintain law enforcement institutions that operate alongside federal security agencies, thereby enhancing inter-agency and inter-state cooperation in dealing with issues of violent crime and criminality within their respective jurisdictions (Bayley, 2008). From the foregoing, therefore, one could conveniently conclude that security is not only a fundamental prerequisite for effective political governance, but it is also a very essential component for the cultivation of peace which invariably provides the enabling atmosphere for sustainable development to thrive. Thus, as noted by Agwanwo (2014), the persistent rise in criminality in Nigeria today, perhaps underscores why many stakeholders has been calling for structural and institutional reforms that would unbundled the entire security architecture of the country for efficient and optimal performers.

Conceptual Clarification

Federalism: Is a system of government whereby power is divided between the central/national government and regional/provincial governments, thus allowing both, to coexist and govern independently within their respective sphere of jurisdiction. In its purest composition, federalism often combines elements of self-rule with that of shared-rule, thus creating a balance that preserve local authority, while maintaining national unity.

State Policing: This has to do with a decentralized law enforcement security arrangement, whereby sub-national units (e.g. states, regions, and provinces) are constitutionally empowered to establish, control and operate their own police force, without unnecessary interference from the central/national police authority.

Security Governance: Refers to the various institutional frameworks, policies, strategies and security processes designed by the government to maintain law, order and public safety within a particular country or jurisdiction. Effective security governance entails cooperation and coordination among law enforcement agencies which promotes accountability, professionalism and community participation.

Security Reforms: This has to do with the political and technical processes of recalibrating and transforming a country's security apparatus, especially its military, police, paramilitary or security organizations to become more transparent, efficient and accountable in their professional conduct and under a democratic civilian control. The ultimate aim is to improve access to security and justice within the framework of respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Sustainable Development: These are a set of socio-economic and political goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015, as part of a universal call to action, to eradicate poverty, protect the environment, and ensure that all citizens of the world enjoys peace, security and prosperity wherever they reside on planet earth before the year 2030. Thus, the 17 SDGs were designed specifically to end hunger, poverty, AIDs and gender discrimination in such a way as to maintain equilibrium between socio-economic development and environmental sustainability.

Theoretical Framework

Though a considerable body of literature on Nigeria's policing system and internal security governance abounds in political and academic discourse, several identifiable lacunae still exist. Firstly, many of the previous studies seem to focus primarily on the legal and constitutional dimensions of state policing, at the expense of its probable implications on development matrix, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Secondly, existing studies often emphasized the risks and benefits of decentralization of security governance, without sufficiently interrogating how policing reforms could positively or negatively influence institutional accountability, quality of governance and sustainable development. It is against this backdrop, therefore, that this paper adopts both Structural Functionalism and Decentralization Theories as its theoretical framework. In the first schema, Craib (1992) defined "Structural Functionalism" as a sociological theory that compares society to a living organism, where each part or member has a specific and necessary function to perform. In other words, Structural Functionalism views society as that complex system composed of many interconnected institutions performing functions necessary for societal growth, stability and survival. It is within this framework, therefore, that the policing institution functions to maintain law and order. Thus, as noted by Onoja *et al* (2024), when existing security structures becomes ineffective and inefficient, as a result of overstretched centralized policing system, new institutional arrangements and alternative security pathways often emerges to restore equilibrium in the form of a decentralized policing model. In the case of Nigeria, this accounts for the creation of various states, local governments and community security outfits, in recent times.

On the other hand, Decentralization Theory entails the statutory delegation of authority, resources and responsibilities from the Central/National government to sub-national entities (e.g., local, state or provincial) which is aimed at enhancing efficiency in governance, accountability, democratic participation, as well as in the management of regional preferences and peculiarities (Sedra, 2010). According to Anderson (1979), one of the consequences of the Cold War era of the 1990s was the growing tendency towards the decentralization of national policing system and the strengthening of local capacity over security governance. Thus, the growing distrust for government that pervaded that era, eventually engendered a movement towards transparency, accountability and citizen participation in security governance that later became a benchmark in transitional and emerging democracies all over the globe. Therefore, as stated by Oates (1999), decentralization theory, especially as regards internal security architecture, is anchored on the premise that local law enforcement structures are better suited to respond to local security emergency needs and distinctive peculiarities due to a combination of socio-ecological factors, like geographical proximity, in-depth demographic knowledge of the environment, as well as professional competency of security personnel.

Dynamics of Centralized Policing System in Nigeria

Since the return of democracy to the country in 1999, managing internal security has become one of the most pressing challenges confronting the Nigerian State. In recent times, violent crimes, like armed robbery, kidnapping, banditry, terrorism and ethno-religious conflicts, has become a common occurrence in different parts of the country. As reported by The Cable (2026), incident such as the Palm Sunday terrorist attack on Christians in Jos and the Chibok girls' incident of 2015, underscores the growing fragility of the Nigerian security architecture. Despite Nigeria's constitutional arrangement as a federation, the country currently operates a centralized policing system whereby the Nigerian Police Force and other security agencies are exclusively controlled by the Federal Government. As noted by Eze (2014), many security experts and stakeholders have argued that this skewed arrangement has not only become old-fashioned, but it is grossly inadequate in tackling contemporary security challenges.

Historically, this centralized policing system in Nigeria was inherited from the colonial masters, who designed it primarily to subjugate the people, uphold their obnoxious rule as well as to maintain law and order in the polity, rather than to serve the security needs of the community (Alemika, 2018). Unfortunately, subsequent post-independence administrations in Nigeria, especially military regimes, basically retained the brutality and centralization model that made the Nigeria Police Force the sole law enforcement agency in the country. However, with Nigeria's returned to democratic rule in 1999, many stakeholders began to question the rationality and desirability of retaining the existing centralized policing system, against the backdrop of growing insecurity confronting the country, especially from terrorism and insurgency, in the North-East, banditry and farmers-herders conflicts, in the North-West and North-Central, as well as armed robbery and kidnapping in the South-East, South-West and South-South geopolitical zones of the federation, respectively (Ibeanu, 2016).

According to Abati (2010), despite the federal government enormous financial outlay to the security sector, yearly, the country has continued to witness daily and deadly spikes of insecurity in different parts of the federation. The persistency and impunity of these security breaches, couple with the inability of the Nigeria Police Force to effectively and decisively deal with the menace, have prompted calls for immediate constitutional restructuring of the

country's policing system, in order to enhance local security governance. To underscore the seriousness of internal security governance to Nigeria's democratic aspiration and its developmental goals, the National Council of State, a body comprising the President and the 36 Governors of the federation, in 2024, submitted a draft proposal supporting the establishment of state policing system for the country, rather than relying on the proliferated ad-hoc state/regional security arrangements that sometimes work at cross-purposes (Sahara Reporter, 2024).

Argument in Support of State Policing in Nigeria

Over the years, exponents of the creation of state policing system have consistently argued that the decentralization of law enforcement apparatus in Nigeria would significantly enhance internal security governance in the country. Towing the same line of argument, Ogun and Igbo (2019) averred that police proximity and engagement with local communities, not only enhance preventive policing methods, it can also lead to instantaneous response to local crime emergencies within each jurisdiction. Another compelling argument for decentralization of the Nigeria security architecture, especially the national police system, is that the adoption of state policing model will greatly stimulate and strengthen partnership with relevant stakeholders in the security sector, from local residents, to civil society, professional groups, labour unions, as well as community leaders, thereby building mutual trust, understanding and cooperation among citizens within their respective locality (Goldsmith, 2010).

Also, some stakeholders have opined that the unbundling of Nigeria's centralized internal security architecture will bring about operational flexibility, professional competence, as well as instigate unique innovative strategies to combat violent crimes within the local communities. Furthermore, Loader and Walker (2007) posit that the establishment of state policing system will give sub-national entities the opportunity to experiment with new security ideas, vibrant policies and modern equipment that are specifically designed for their local environment. In the same vein, some security and development experts have argued that a decentralized policing system, coupled with adequate institutional oversight, would promote transparency, accountability and the subordination of internal security governance to civil authority. In the long run, Newell (2006) believed that this will lead to greater respect for human right and the rule of law in our democratic journey.

Fears and Criticism of State Policing in Nigeria

Despite its potential benefits, the agitation for state policing system in Nigeria has equally generated a lot of anxiety and criticism from many stakeholders. One of the first major constraints to the establishment of state policing model, usually cited by critics, is the stringent legal and constitutional reform procedures required for its actualization. According to Ibeanu (2016), it will require a two-third majority vote at the National Assembly and also the approval of at least two-third of the State Legislatures to secure such Amendment. One of the most frequently cited concerns about the establishment of state policing in Nigeria is the risk of undue political interference and manipulation of their operations by overzealous State Governors. Usang (2021) warned that state chief executives could hijack and misuse the police institution under their direct control to serve their selfish interests, rather than being used for public good. He averred that incidents of political repression, electoral manipulation and human right violations may become common occurrences within the polity, if eventually established.

Another salient reservation about the adoption of state policing model in Nigeria has to do with the financial viability and sustainability of the project. Sukara and Abdulla (2025) had argued that many states of the federation are currently facing serious financial constraints, and many lack the resources needed to establish and maintain a 21st century standard police force. Thus, without the required funding, state police institutions could suffer from poor training, inadequate equipment and limited operational capacity. Additionally, some scholars have also cautioned that the proposed decentralization of the existing police system could lead to issues of fragmentation and ineffective coordination between the federal and states' security agencies. Consequently, Agwanwo (2014) posits that such fragmented policing system, without clear operational guidelines and oversight control, could significantly impair the national security governance mechanism of the federation.

Implications for Sustainable Development Goals

In the past few years, the Nigerian internal security ecosystem has deteriorated significantly as a result of incidents of banditry, kidnapping, terrorism, ethno-religious conflicts, as well as other organized violent crimes. Media reports shows a steady rise in criminality and fatalities across the different zones of the federation, with serious implications for national security and the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (Cole, 2025). In several academic and political discourses, stakeholders in the security and development sub-sectors, like Jega (2007), Ikelegbe (2006), Albert (2012), Elaigwu (2014), have highlighted the inter-connectedness between effective policing, peace, security, good governance and the attainment of sustainable development. For emphasis, security institutions are the fundamental pillars in the maintenance of law and order, social stability and the protection of economic infrastructure and private businesses which contributes to overall societal and national development.

As noted by UNDP (2020), within the framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), security governance closely resonates with SDG-16, which focuses on the attainment of peace, justice and establishment of strong institutions. In this vein, therefore, a centralized and weak policing institution may undermine public trust, affect investment opportunities, and also exacerbate the problem of social inequality in the society. Hence, Ejiefor (2012) emphasized the need to have an effective and efficient policing system that can meet the security challenges on ground. Consequently, concerning the impact of state policing on SDG-2 and 8, which deal with security, agricultural development and economic wellbeing of the citizenry, any skewed disequilibrium in the security governance sub-sector is capable of disrupting food production, economic activities and rural livelihoods. Lastly, on the other hand, strengthening internal security governance, through the adoption of state policing system, may help assuage these disruptions and ultimately promote sustainable development.

Recommendations

- i. **Constitutional Framework:** The first major pathway to achieving effective internal security governance and sustainable development goals (SDGs) in Nigeria is to amend the relevant section of the 1999 Constitution to accommodate the creation of state policing security architecture.
- ii. **Institutional Oversight:** For the state policing model to work effectively and efficiently there must be an independent body or commission under the oversight of either the

- Parliament or the Judiciary, saddled with the responsibility of ensuring transparency, accountability, professionalism and neutrality in service delivery.
- iii. **Financial Sustainability:** Policing is a capital intensive venture that requires adequate and consistent funding to protect its integrity and neutrality. In view of the fiscal disparity among states, an enduring funding arrangement, either by statutory allocation or security grant, must be put in place to support individual state police institution.
 - iv. **Regular Capacity Building:** To ensure a professional and combat-ready state police force in Nigeria, we must develop a standardized recruitment and training programmes that aligns with global best practices, and also take into cognizance the peculiarity of the environment in which it exist, especially in terms of competence, use of technology, and respect for the rule of law.
 - v. **Synergetic Cooperation:** In 21st century policing system, inter-state and inter-agency cooperation and coordination is the hallmark of modern security management. Therefore, from the very onset, there should be an effective policy and operational framework for intelligence sharing, combat training and joint security patrol between the federal and state law enforcement agencies.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, rising security challenges in Nigeria have highlighted the limitations of a centralized policing system within the federation. Though the idea of a state policing model remains a contested issue amongst stakeholders, it affords us the opportunity to recalibrate and reform our internal security governance mechanism to align with the principles of federalism and modern policing arrangement, as well as emerging security challenges (Shrestha & Hanklay, 2025). Some stakeholders are of the opinion that unbundling and reforming the current Nigerian policing system is not only critical to the improvement of internal security strategies, but that it will also strengthen institutions of governance, especially in their quest towards the attainment of sustainable development. Therefore, Adekanye (2015) posit that effective state policing system will not only enhance a stable economic environment, but it will also help to stimulate citizens' participation in local governance processes. Nonetheless, as noted by Dambazzau (2007), the adoption of state policing security architecture in Nigeria, if properly designed and objectively implemented, could help address the slothfulness associated with centralized policing model, as well as strengthen institutional accountability. But steps must be taken to prevent undue political interference from Chief Executives that could undermine democracy and fundamental human rights.

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