

NIGERIA – SOUTH AFRICA RELATIONS AND THE IMPERATIVES OF SUSTAINABLE INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Dr. Udoh, Ogonnaya
Dept. of Political Science, Abia State
University, Uturu

Abstract

Nigeria and South Africa stand as the two most dominant economies in Africa, and their bilateral relations have increasingly become central to discussions on regional economic integration and industrial development. However, despite growing trade relations and foreign direct investment flows between both countries, Nigeria's industrial sector remains relatively underdeveloped, raising critical concerns about the developmental impact of such partnerships. This study therefore investigates the extent to which Nigeria–South Africa relations have contributed to sustainable industrial development in Nigeria. The main objective of the study is to assess whether these bilateral engagements foster industrial growth or reinforce structural dependency that limits Nigeria's industrial transformation. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology, relying on secondary sources such as scholarly articles, policy reports, and institutional publications. Dependency Theory serves as the theoretical framework, providing an analytical lens through which to explain the asymmetric economic relations between the two countries and how such imbalances affect industrial outcomes in Nigeria. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the complexities of intra-African economic relations and their implications for sustainable development policy formulation. The findings reveal that although Nigeria–South Africa relations have enhanced trade expansion, attracted foreign investment, and facilitated limited technology transfer, they simultaneously reinforce dependency patterns and weaken Nigeria's domestic industrial capacity. The study concludes that, without deliberate policy intervention, bilateral relations may continue to reproduce structural imbalances rather than promote industrial sustainability. It therefore recommends stronger institutional frameworks, effective technology transfer mechanisms, and robust local content development policies to ensure that Nigeria fully benefits from its economic relations with South Africa.

Introduction

Nigeria–South Africa relations occupy a central position in contemporary African political economy, reflecting a complex blend of historical solidarity, diplomatic cooperation, and emerging economic interdependence. Historically, Nigeria played a frontline role in the struggle against apartheid, providing political, financial, and diplomatic support to liberation movements in South Africa, particularly the African National Congress (ANC), thereby laying a strong foundation for post-apartheid bilateral relations (Adebajo, 2010). This shared liberation history created expectations of continued solidarity in the post-independence era, especially in advancing Africa's collective development agenda.

In the post-apartheid period, Nigeria–South Africa relations evolved significantly, shifting from ideological solidarity to pragmatic economic engagement and regional power competition. Both countries emerged as dominant actors in Africa, often described as continental “giants” due to their demographic, economic, and diplomatic influence (Obi, 2010). While they cooperate within regional platforms such as the African Union and NEPAD, their relations have also been marked by rivalry for leadership in shaping Africa's political and economic direction (Ogunnubi & Amao, 2016).

Economically, the relationship has deepened considerably, particularly with South Africa becoming one of the largest sources of foreign direct investment in Nigeria. South African multinational corporations have established strong footholds in critical sectors of the Nigerian economy, including telecommunications, banking, retail, media, and entertainment (Akinola, 2018). These investments have contributed to job creation, service delivery expansion, and increased consumer market integration between both countries. However, they have also raised concerns about market dominance and the extent to which such investments support Nigeria's domestic industrial capacity.

Despite Nigeria's status as Africa's largest economy by population and one of its most resource-rich nations, its industrial base remains weak and underdeveloped. The manufacturing sector contributes a relatively low share to national output, while the economy continues to rely heavily on imports for both consumer and capital goods

(World Bank, 2020). Structural constraints such as inadequate infrastructure, policy inconsistency, weak industrial planning, and limited technological innovation continue to hinder industrial growth.

In contrast, South Africa possesses a more diversified and relatively advanced industrial economy, supported by stronger technological capabilities, developed financial systems, and more stable industrial policies (UNIDO, 2020). This structural asymmetry positions South Africa as a more dominant economic partner in bilateral engagements, thereby influencing the nature and outcomes of Nigeria–South Africa economic relations.

The growing presence of South African multinational corporations in Nigeria has further intensified debates about economic dependency and industrial sovereignty. While these corporations contribute to economic activity, their dominance in strategic sectors such as telecommunications, retail, and banking has raised concerns about the displacement of local firms and the limited development of indigenous industrial capacity (OECD, 2018). In many cases, profit repatriation and limited local content integration further reduce the developmental benefits of such investments.

This situation raises critical questions about whether Nigeria–South Africa relations genuinely foster sustainable industrial development in Nigeria or whether they reinforce structural imbalances that perpetuate dependency. As a result, scholars and policymakers continue to interrogate the developmental implications of this bilateral relationship, particularly in the context of Nigeria’s industrialization challenges and Africa’s broader quest for economic transformation (Adegbite et al., 2019).

In essence, while Nigeria–South Africa relations appears to present significant opportunities for economic cooperation, trade expansion, and investment inflows, the persistence of industrial underdevelopment in Nigeria suggests that these benefits may not be sufficiently transformative. This makes it necessary to critically examine the structural dynamics underlying the relationship and their implications for sustainable industrial development in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Nigeria–South Africa relations refer to the structured diplomatic, political, and economic engagements that exist between Nigeria and South Africa within the broader framework of African regional and continental cooperation (Adebajo, 2010). These relations are historically rooted in Nigeria’s active support for South Africa’s liberation struggle against apartheid, which laid the foundation for strong post-independence diplomatic solidarity. Over time, however, this relationship has evolved beyond ideological alignment into a more complex system of state-to-state interaction characterized by economic exchange, diplomatic negotiation, and strategic competition within Africa’s regional political economy (Ogunnubi & Amao, 2016). In contemporary terms, Nigeria–South Africa relations encompass a wide range of activities, including bilateral trade agreements, foreign direct investment flows, political consultations, security cooperation, and participation in regional integration frameworks such as the African Union and NEPAD (Obi, 2010). Importantly, these relations are not purely cooperative; they also reflect underlying competition for continental leadership, economic influence, and geopolitical relevance within Africa’s emerging multipolar system (Obi, 2010; Ogunnubi & Amao, 2016).

Sustainable industrial development refers to a long-term process of industrial growth that is not only economically productive but also socially inclusive and environmentally responsible. It involves building an industrial base capable of generating sustained economic output while minimizing environmental degradation and ensuring intergenerational equity (UNIDO, 2020). At its core, sustainable industrial development emphasizes continuous productivity improvement, technological innovation, and structural transformation from primary commodity dependence to value-added manufacturing and industrial production (World Bank, 2020). It also entails strengthening domestic production capacity in order to reduce overreliance on imported goods and services, thereby enhancing economic resilience and self-sufficiency (OECD, 2018). In developing economies such as Nigeria, sustainable industrial development is particularly important because it serves as a pathway to job creation, poverty reduction, and economic diversification away from oil dependency.

Industrialization in Nigeria refers to the deliberate expansion and strengthening of the manufacturing and productive sectors of the economy with the aim of achieving economic diversification and structural transformation (Adegbite et al., 2019). It involves the establishment and growth of industries that process raw materials into finished or semi-finished goods, thereby increasing value addition within the domestic economy. In principle, industrialization is expected to reduce Nigeria’s heavy dependence on oil exports and imported manufactured goods while promoting employment generation and technological advancement. However, Nigeria’s industrialization process has been significantly constrained by a range of structural and institutional

challenges. These include inadequate infrastructure, particularly in electricity and transportation, weak industrial policy implementation, inconsistent government regulations, and limited access to modern technology and finance (Akinola, 2018). As a result, the country's industrial sector has remained underdeveloped and unable to compete effectively in both regional and global markets.

Collectively, these conceptual clarifications provide the analytical foundation for understanding how Nigeria–South Africa relations interact with Nigeria's industrial development trajectory. They also highlight the tension between external economic engagement and internal structural limitations that continue to shape Nigeria's industrial outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Dependency Theory is primarily associated with prominent scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, Walter Rodney, and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, whose works critically examined the structural inequalities embedded in the global capitalist system (Frank, 1967; Amin, 1976; Rodney, 1972; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). These proponents challenged modernization perspectives by arguing that underdevelopment in the Global South is not a natural stage of development but a consequence of historical exploitation and unequal integration into the global economy. Their collective contributions laid the intellectual foundation for understanding how economic relationships between nations can perpetuate dependency rather than promote balanced development.

At its core, Dependency Theory posits that the international economic system is structured in a hierarchical manner, dividing the world into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral economies (Frank, 1967). Core economies possess advanced industrial capacity, technological superiority, and capital accumulation, while peripheral economies are characterized by weak industrial bases and dependence on external resources. Semi-peripheral economies occupy an intermediate position, exercising dominance over weaker economies while remaining dependent on more advanced ones. This hierarchical arrangement ensures that economic benefits are unevenly distributed, favoring the core and, to some extent, the semi-periphery.

A central argument of the theory is that developing countries remain dependent on developed or relatively advanced economies for capital, technology, and markets (Amin, 1976). This dependency is historically rooted in colonialism and reinforced by post-colonial economic arrangements that tie peripheral economies to external centers of production and consumption. As a result, economic activities in these countries are often externally oriented, focusing on the export of raw materials and the importation of finished goods.

This condition produces what Rodney (1972) describes as “underdevelopment,” a situation in which the economic structures of peripheral countries are shaped in ways that inhibit autonomous growth. Rather than progressing toward industrialization, such economies remain trapped in cycles of dependency characterized by limited technological advancement, weak manufacturing sectors, and vulnerability to external shocks. The unequal exchange of goods where raw materials are exported at lower prices and manufactured goods are imported at higher costs further exacerbates this imbalance.

Dependency theorists also emphasize the role of multinational corporations and foreign investment in sustaining these inequalities (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). While foreign direct investment is often presented as a catalyst for development, it can instead function as a mechanism for extracting surplus value from host economies. Multinational firms typically repatriate profits, rely on imported inputs, and establish limited linkages with local industries, thereby constraining domestic industrial growth and reinforcing dependency structures.

In the context of Nigeria–South Africa relations, Dependency Theory provides a useful framework for analyzing the asymmetrical nature of economic interactions between the two countries. South Africa, with its relatively advanced industrial base, strong financial institutions, and higher technological capacity, occupies a semi-peripheral position within Africa's economic hierarchy (Adebajo, 2010). Its multinational corporations possess the capital and expertise necessary to expand into other African markets, including Nigeria.

Nigeria, by contrast, despite its large population and resource endowment, remains heavily dependent on foreign investment and imported technologies for industrial production (Obi, 2010). This structural dependence limits the country's ability to develop independent industrial capabilities and reinforces its subordinate position in bilateral economic relations. The expansion of South African firms into Nigeria's telecommunications, banking, retail, and entertainment sectors illustrates this dynamic, as these firms often dominate key industries due to their financial strength and technological advantages (Ogunnubi & Amao, 2016).

Such dominance has significant implications for Nigeria's industrial development. While foreign investments contribute to economic activity and service delivery, they do not necessarily translate into sustainable industrial growth. Instead, they may crowd out local enterprises, reduce opportunities for indigenous innovation, and weaken

domestic industrial capacity (Akinola, 2018). Additionally, the repatriation of profits by foreign firms reduces the availability of capital for reinvestment within Nigeria, thereby limiting the growth of the local industrial sector (World Bank, 2020).

Another important dimension of dependency highlighted by the theory is the limited transfer of technology and skills. Many multinational corporations operate in enclave-like structures, with minimal integration into local supply chains, thereby restricting knowledge diffusion and technological advancement in host economies. This further entrenches Nigeria's dependence on external sources of technology and expertise.

Dependency Theory therefore underscores the argument that increased economic interaction between countries does not automatically lead to mutual development. In the case of Nigeria–South Africa relations, the structural imbalance between the two economies means that the benefits of cooperation are unevenly distributed. Without deliberate policy measures to promote local participation, technology transfer, and industrial capacity building, such relations may continue to reinforce dependency rather than foster sustainable industrial development (UNIDO, 2020).

Trade and Investment Dynamics

Nigeria–South Africa relations have significantly expanded trade flows and investment linkages between both countries, positioning South Africa as one of the most influential economic actors within Nigeria's domestic market (Adebajo, 2010). From a dependency perspective, this expansion reflects not merely mutual economic cooperation but a structured interaction in which a relatively stronger economy penetrates and consolidates influence within a weaker one. South African companies have particularly expanded into Nigeria's telecommunications sector, where firms such as mobile network providers command substantial market share and technological advantage (Akinola, 2018). This expansion illustrates the dependency argument that capital-rich economies extend their dominance into peripheral markets by controlling strategic sectors.

Similarly, South African retail corporations have established a dominant presence in Nigeria's consumer markets, reshaping patterns of consumption and distribution (Ogunnubi & Amao, 2016). While these investments contribute to the modernization of retail systems and improve consumer access to goods, dependency theorists argue that such dominance may simultaneously undermine local enterprises by exposing them to competition they are structurally ill-equipped to withstand. Consequently, although these investments generate employment and expand service delivery, they often do so in ways that do not fundamentally transform domestic industrial capacity (Obi, 2010).

Furthermore, the financial strength and organizational efficiency of South African corporations create significant barriers for local firms, which struggle to compete due to limited access to capital, technology, and infrastructure (OECD, 2018). This dynamic leads to market concentration, where foreign firms dominate key sectors, thereby reducing the competitiveness and survival prospects of indigenous industries (World Bank, 2020). From a dependency standpoint, this reflects a classic pattern of external domination in which local economic structures become subordinate to foreign capital.

An additional concern is the repatriation of profits by multinational corporations, which limits the accumulation of capital within the Nigerian economy (UNIDO, 2020). Rather than being reinvested locally to stimulate industrial growth, a significant portion of generated wealth is transferred back to the home country, thereby reinforcing external dependence and weakening domestic industrial expansion. In this sense, trade and investment relations, while beneficial in the short term, may perpetuate long-term structural dependency.

Technology Transfer and Industrial Capacity

Technology transfer is widely regarded as a critical mechanism for industrial development, enabling developing countries to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for production, innovation, and competitiveness (UNIDO, 2020). Within the context of Nigeria–South Africa relations, South African firms possess relatively advanced technologies and managerial expertise that could, in principle, contribute to Nigeria's industrial upgrading (World Bank, 2020). However, Dependency Theory cautions that such potential benefits are often constrained by the nature of foreign investment structures.

In practice, many multinational corporations operating in Nigeria function with limited integration into local production systems, maintaining strong links to their home economies while minimizing engagement with domestic industries (OECD, 2018). This enclave mode of operation restricts the diffusion of knowledge and technology, thereby limiting the potential for local industries to benefit from foreign presence. As a result, the expected spillover effects such as skill acquisition, innovation, and technological learning remain weak (Adegbite et al., 2019).

Consequently, Nigeria continues to depend heavily on imported machinery, technical expertise, and industrial inputs, reinforcing its position as a peripheral economy within the global system (Akinola, 2018). This dependence inhibits the development of indigenous technological capabilities, as local firms lack both the resources and institutional support necessary to innovate independently. Over time, this dynamic perpetuates a cycle of technological dependence, where domestic industries remain reliant on external sources for advancement.

From a dependency perspective, the limited transfer of technology is not accidental but systemic, reflecting the broader logic of global capitalism in which dominant economies maintain control over critical knowledge and production processes. This ensures that peripheral economies, such as Nigeria, remain consumers rather than producers of advanced technology (Obi, 2010). Thus, despite the presence of technologically advanced foreign firms, Nigeria's industrial capacity remains constrained, highlighting the limitations of relying on external actors for development.

Infrastructure and Industrial Development

Infrastructure constitutes a fundamental pillar of industrial development, as it directly influences production efficiency, cost structures, and competitiveness (World Bank, 2020). In Nigeria, infrastructural deficits particularly in electricity supply, transportation, and logistics pose significant challenges to industrial growth (UNIDO, 2020). These deficiencies increase operational costs for industries, reduce productivity, and discourage both local and foreign investment.

Poor transportation networks further compound these challenges by limiting the efficient movement of raw materials and finished goods across the country (OECD, 2018). This undermines supply chain efficiency and restricts the ability of industries to scale production. From a dependency standpoint, such infrastructural weaknesses reinforce Nigeria's peripheral status by preventing it from developing a robust and competitive industrial base (Adegbite et al., 2019).

Nigeria–South Africa relations present opportunities for addressing some of these infrastructural challenges, particularly through investment and technical collaboration. South African firms have contributed to improvements in certain sectors, most notably telecommunications, where infrastructure development has enhanced connectivity and service delivery (Akinola, 2018). However, these contributions remain sector-specific and do not extend comprehensively to critical areas such as power generation and heavy industrial infrastructure. Dependency Theory suggests that foreign investment in infrastructure often prioritizes sectors that facilitate market access and profit generation rather than those that support broad-based industrial development. This explains why infrastructural improvements linked to South African investment are concentrated in commercially viable sectors, while fundamental industrial infrastructure remains underdeveloped (Ogunnubi & Amao, 2016). As a result, Nigeria continues to face structural constraints that limit its industrial transformation.

Policy and Institutional Environment

The effectiveness of trade and investment relations in promoting industrial development is heavily dependent on the strength of domestic policy and institutional frameworks (OECD, 2018). In Nigeria, industrial policies have historically been characterized by inconsistency, weak implementation, and limited coordination, thereby reducing their effectiveness in supporting industrial growth (World Bank, 2020). From a dependency perspective, weak institutions exacerbate external dependence by limiting the state's capacity to regulate foreign economic activities.

Corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies further undermine the effectiveness of industrial regulation, creating an environment in which foreign investors can exploit regulatory loopholes for profit maximization (Adegbite et al., 2019). This often results in practices that prioritize short-term gains over long-term industrial development, such as minimal local content utilization and limited technology transfer.

Foreign firms operating within such weak regulatory environments are less likely to contribute meaningfully to domestic industrialization, as there are few incentives or enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with development-oriented policies (Obi, 2010). Consequently, Nigeria's industrial sector remains underdeveloped, while foreign firms continue to dominate key economic activities.

The weak enforcement of local content policies further limits the participation of domestic industries in production processes, thereby reducing opportunities for capacity building and industrial learning (Akinola, 2018). This reinforces dependency by ensuring that critical aspects of production remain controlled by foreign entities.

Dependency Theory therefore emphasizes the importance of strong institutional frameworks in mitigating the negative effects of external dependence. Without effective governance structures, bilateral relations such as those between Nigeria and South Africa may continue to reinforce structural inequalities rather than promote sustainable industrial development (UNIDO, 2020).

The analysis reveals that while Nigeria–South Africa relations provide opportunities for trade expansion, investment inflows, and infrastructural improvements, these benefits are constrained by structural dynamics consistent with Dependency Theory. The dominance of South African firms, limited technology transfer, infrastructural imbalances, and weak institutional frameworks collectively reinforce Nigeria’s dependent position within the regional economy. Unless deliberate policy measures are implemented to strengthen domestic industrial capacity and regulate foreign participation, these relations may continue to reproduce dependency rather than foster sustainable industrial development.

Conclusion

Nigeria–South Africa relations undoubtedly represent one of the most consequential bilateral engagements in Africa, offering both significant opportunities and persistent challenges for Nigeria’s industrial development trajectory. On the one hand, the relationship has facilitated increased trade flows, attracted foreign direct investment, and enhanced service delivery across key sectors of the Nigerian economy. On the other hand, the structural realities underpinning this engagement reveal a pattern of asymmetry that continues to constrain Nigeria’s industrial transformation. The persistence of weak manufacturing capacity, limited technological advancement, and a high dependence on imports suggests that the benefits of this relationship have not translated into sustainable industrial development.

From the standpoint of Dependency Theory, these outcomes are not accidental but are deeply embedded in the nature of economic interactions between relatively stronger and weaker economies. The dominance of South African multinational corporations in critical sectors of Nigeria’s economy, coupled with limited technology transfer and significant profit repatriation, reinforces a cycle of dependency that undermines domestic industrial growth. Rather than fostering self-reliance, such relations risk entrenching Nigeria’s position as a consumer market for externally driven production systems.

This study argues that Nigeria–South Africa relations, in their current form, lean more toward reinforcing dependency than promoting genuine industrial development in Nigeria. While the relationship is not inherently detrimental, its developmental outcomes are largely determined by the structure of engagement and the strength of domestic policy frameworks. Without deliberate and strategic intervention, Nigeria is likely to continue experiencing “growth without development,” in which economic activities expand without corresponding industrial deepening.

Therefore, the study concludes that Nigeria must move beyond passive participation in bilateral relations and adopt a more strategic, state-driven approach to economic engagement. This includes enforcing local content policies, prioritizing technology transfer, strengthening domestic industries, and building institutional capacity to regulate foreign investment effectively. Only through such deliberate efforts can Nigeria reposition its relationship with South Africa as a tool for achieving sustainable and inclusive industrial development rather than as a mechanism that perpetuates structural dependency.

Recommendations

1. Nigeria should strengthen and rigorously enforce local content policies to enhance domestic industrial participation and ensure that indigenous firms benefit meaningfully from foreign investments.

Institutional Reforms and Governance Improvement

2. Comprehensive institutional reforms are necessary to improve regulatory effectiveness, transparency, and investment governance in order to maximize the developmental impact of bilateral economic relations.
3. Technology transfer clauses should be made compulsory in major foreign investment agreements to facilitate skill acquisition, innovation, and the development of indigenous industrial capacity.
4. Infrastructure development, particularly in electricity, transportation, and industrial logistics, to enhance productivity and competitiveness within the industrial sector (Adegbite et al., 2019).
5. Nigeria should actively strengthen regional and bilateral cooperation frameworks to promote more balanced, mutually beneficial economic relations and reduce structural dependency (Akinola, 2018).

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