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Between Aspiration and Patronage: A Critical Appraisal of Nigeria's Six Regional Development Commissions

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Abstract

Nigeria recently established six geopolitical zone-based development commissions namely, the North-East Development Commission (NEDC), North-West Development Commission (NWDC), North-Central Development Commission (NCDC), South-East Development Commission (SEDC), South-South Development Commission (SSDC), and South-West Development Commission (SWDC). These commissions represent a significant institutional experiment in state-directed regional development. This study examines these commissions, interrogating whether they can function as genuine catalysts of regional economic transformation or are destined to become yet another layer of patronage politics and institutional dysfunction. Drawing on a qualitative and interpretive methodology incorporating secondary sources of data, the study situates the commissions within Nigeria's long and troubled history with development agencies, from the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB) of 1961 to the Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) of 1993, and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) of 2000. The study employs a combination of neo-patrimonialism theory and institutional theory to explain how political incentive structures systematically undermine developmental mandates in Nigeria's public sector. The findings reveal that while the commissions possess a structural rationale rooted in the need to address entrenched regional disparities, their design flaws including overlapping mandates, weak accountability frameworks, opaque governance structures, and susceptibility to patronage politics substantially threaten their effectiveness. The study concludes that without radical reforms to governance, accountability mechanisms, and funding predictability, the six commissions risk replicating the well-documented failures of their predecessors. Policy recommendations include proper clarification of their mandate, state co-ownership models, outcome-based funding, and robust civil society oversight.

Keywords: Development commissions, Neo-patrimonialism, Institutional theory, Regional development, Nigeria.

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Introduction

The relationship between institutional design and developmental outcomes is among the most contested and consequential questions in the governance literature. For post-colonial states like Nigeria, where resource asymmetries are acute, ethnic and regional cleavages deeply politicised, and institutional capacity chronically weak, the architecture of development agencies is not merely a technical matter, it is fundamentally a political one. Nigeria's recent proliferation of geopolitical zone-based development commissions offers an extraordinary case study in the tension between the rhetoric of inclusive development and the structural tendencies toward political patronage that characterise what scholars have called Africa's 'big man' governance problem (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994).

The concept of targeted regional development institutions is not novel. From the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in the United States, established in 1933, to the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) founded in 1965, to the United Kingdom's various regional development agencies, governments across the world have experimented with purpose-built bodies mandated to address geographically concentrated developmental deficits (Selznick, 1949, Isserman&Rephann, 1995). Nigeria's version of this experiment began with the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB) in 1961, passed through the ill-fated OMPADEC in 1993, and arrived at the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000. Each iteration marred by the same institutional pathologies of corruption, opacity, political manipulation, and developmental underperformance (Ikelegbe, 2005; Isumonah, 2013).

Yet, rather than learning from the shortcomings of earlier development commissions, Nigeria, under the administrations of Presidents Buhari and Ahmed Tinubu, has expanded the commission model to all six geopolitical zones of the country. In 2025, the National Assembly passed enabling legislation establishing commissions for the North-West, South-East, North-Central, South-West, and South-South, in addition to the North-East Development Commission, which was created in 2017. Collectively, these commissions received a budgetary allocation of ₦1.57 trillion in the 2025 federal budget, representing approximately 2.86 per cent of the total national budget (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2025). This expansion constitutes one of the most ambitious experiments in regional development governance in Nigeria's post-independence history.

This proliferation raises urgent scholarly and policy questions. Why, given the manifest failures of predecessors, does Nigeria persist with and indeed multiply this institutional form? Are the new commissions designed differently enough to avoid the pitfalls of OMPADEC and NDDC? Do they complement or duplicate existing development agencies?How effective are their governance and accountability systems? and what structural deficits limit their effectiveness? This study seeks to fill an important gap in the literature on Nigerian governance and regional development. While there is a growing body of scholarship on specific commissions particularly the NDDC (Ikelegbe, 2005; Isumonah, 2013), there is no comprehensive comparative analysis of all six new commissions that situates them within both a theoretical and historical framework. This study addresses that gap by providing a systematic and theoretically grounded appraisal of each commission and drawing

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implications for policy and practice. The remaining sections proceeds as follows; Section two outlines the methodology. Section three provides a literature review covering the theoretical tension between regional development aspirations and patronage tendencies. Section four presents the theoretical framework. Section five offers a historical analysis of development commissions in Nigeria. Section six provides a regional analysis of each of the six commissions. Section forms the conclusion and recommendation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research approach, consistent with the tradition of constructivist inquiry (Creswell, 2014). The ontological position underpinning this research is that the reality of institutional effectiveness in Nigeria's development commissions is socially constructed, and best understood through interpretation of meaning, context, and historical trajectory rather than through the quantification of outcomes alone. The data collection strategies included and in-depth documentary analysis of enabling legislation setting up these commissions The interpretive dimension of this study involves critically reading of the assumptions embedded in the institutional designs, mandate formulations, and political justifications offered for the creation of the commissions. The obvious limitations of this approach include the relative novelty of most of the commissions under study, several were established between 2017-2025, meaning that empirical performance data is sparse. This study therefore emphasises structural and institutional analysis where longitudinal data is unavailable.

Literature Review: Development Aspiration Versus Patronage Reality

The scholarly literature on regional development institutions reflects a fundamental tension between two competing logics; the developmental logic, which holds that purpose-built institutions can concentrate expertise, resources, and political will to address geographically specific challenges; and the political economy logic, which argues that such institutions are inherently vulnerable to capture by rent-seeking elites (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). This tension is particularly acute in contexts characterised by what Bratton and Van de Walle (1994) call 'neo patrimonial' governance, where formal institutional rules are systematically subverted by informal networks of personal loyalty and political patronage.

Rodriguez-Pose and Gill (2003) argue that the effectiveness of regional development institutions depends critically on the presence of three enabling conditions; genuine devolution of powers and resources, accountability to regional populations rather than central authorities, and alignment between institutional mandates and territorial development needs. Where these conditions are absent as is generally the case in quasi federal states like Nigeria, regional development bodies tend to become instruments of central control rather than vehicles for territorial empowerment.

Internationally, successful models like the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) share important design features. The TVA was established with a clear, sectorally defined mandate (hydroelectric power and flood control), enjoyed statutory independence from political interference, and was held accountable to measurable outcomes (Selznick, 1949). The ARC,

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similarly, employs a consensus-based co-governance model that gives equal voting weight to federal and state partners, ensuring that interventions are negotiated from the bottom up rather than imposed from above (Isserman&Rephann, 1995). These design features mandate specificity, co-governance, and outcome accountability are unclear in Nigeria's commission model.

Nigeria's Prebendal State and the Patronage Problem

Richard Joseph's (1987, 1999) concept of 'prebendalism'; the systematic appropriation of public offices and state resources for private benefit, legitimised by ethnic and communal solidarity provides a powerful explanatory lens for understanding why Nigerian public institutions so consistently fail to deliver developmental outcomes.

In a prebendal state, appointments to public boards and commissions are understood by all parties as opportunities for patronage distribution rather than as mandates for public service. The question, therefore, is not whether development commissions will be used for patronage in Nigeria, but rather whether institutional design can mitigate the damage.

Ake (1996) extends this analysis by arguing that the 'politics of development' in Africa has historically been antithetical to actual development. African states, he argues, have instrumentalised development discourse using the language of regional equity, poverty reduction, and economic transformation to legitimate the continued concentration of resources at the centre and their redistribution through patronage networks. The proliferation of development commissions in Nigeria fits this pattern. Each new commission represents a new pool of patronage resources, legitimised by a developmental rationale that is rarely operationalised in practice.

The specific literature on the NDDC chronicle this dynamic in exhaustive detail. Ikelegbe (2005) demonstrates that the NDDC was captured almost immediately upon establishment by political elites from the Niger Delta who used its contracting machinery to enrich themselves and consolidate political support bases. Isumonah (2013) shows that the commission's project selection criteria were driven primarily by political calculations rather than developmental priorities, resulting in a portfolio of abandoned and poorly executed projects that consumed enormous resources while leaving core developmental challenges unaddressed. Obi (2014) further argues that the NDDC became a 'development spectacle', an institution whose primary function was performative, signalling federal commitment to Niger Delta development without substantively delivering it.

The Challenge of Institutional Design

A third strand of literature focuses on the institutional design features that predict whether development agencies will be captured by patronage interests. North (1990) famously argued that 'institutions matter' because they create the rules and incentive structures that shape human behaviour in organisational contexts. The key design variables identified in the literature include; the breadth and specificity of the mandate, the independence of governance structures from political appointment processes, the transparency and comprehensiveness of accountability mechanisms, the adequacy and predictability of funding, and the extent of bottom-up participation in project identification and oversight (Evans, 1995).

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Reviewing these criteria against Nigeria's commission model is instructive. As Fasan (2024) notes, the enabling acts for all six commissions share virtually identical mandate formulations, broad, ambitious, and imprecise that provide no basis for prioritising among competing demands or for measuring success. Governance structures remain dominated by federal appointees, with state representation confined to advisory roles. Accountability mechanisms are formulaic, relying on annual audits that are routinely delayed or suppressed. Funding is allocated as a percentage of federation account revenues, creating both unpredictability and a political economy of inter-commission competition rather than inter-commission cooperation. These design features are precisely those associated with institutional failure in the comparative development literature.

Mkandawire (2001) offers a useful concept in this context, the 'developmental state'. For development institutions to function effectively, he argues, they require what he calls 'embedded autonomy' strong ties to the communities they serve combined with insulation from short-term political pressures. Nigeria's development commissions, paradoxically, achieve neither. They are neither sufficiently autonomous from political patronage pressures nor sufficiently embedded in the communities whose needs they are supposed to address.

Theoretical Framework: Neo-Patrimonialism Theory and Historical Institutionalism

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks: neo-patrimonialism theory and the new institutionalism (specifically, historical institutionalism). Together, these frameworks provide explanation on why Nigerian development commissions tend to fail and what conditions might enable them to succeed.

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Neo-Patrimonialism Theory

Neo-patrimonialism, as developed by Eisenstadt (1973) and elaborated in the African context by Bratton and Van de Walle (1994), describes a hybrid governance system in which formal bureaucratic-rational institutions coexist with informal networks of personal loyalty and patrimonial authority. In neo-patrimonial states, the critical distinction between public office and private interest is systematically blurred. Public resources are treated as personal property, appointments are made on the basis of personal loyalty rather than professional merit, and institutional decisions are shaped by the imperative of maintaining patronage networks rather than delivering public goods.

Neo-patrimonialism theory posits that in states characterised by entrenched neo-patrimonial governance cultures, newly created institutions are likely to be rapidly captured and co-opted by existing patronage networks, irrespective of their formal mandates. This reflects the broader "institutions follow politics" thesis, which argues that political power relations and strategic interests ultimately shape the design, operation, and outcomes of formal state institutions, rather than institutions independently determining political behaviour. In this view, rules, procedures, and organisational structures are frequently created, modified, or subverted to advance the interests of dominant political actors (Khan, 2010). Consequently, even institutions that are well designed on paper are unlikely to achieve their intended developmental objectives when embedded within political environments characterised by pervasive rent-seeking incentives. Nigeria's experience with successive development commissions; from the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) to the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the North-East Development Commission (NEDC) provides compelling empirical support for this proposition. Rather than serving as effective instruments of regional transformation, these institutions have often been constrained by the same patronage dynamics they were expected to overcome.

Crucially, however, neo-patrimonialism theory also recognises that the degree of patronage capture varies with institutional design, leadership quality, and civil society pressure. This suggests that the challenges of development commissions in Nigeria are not inevitable, but rather contingent on the specific governance arrangements and accountability structures within which they operate. This opens space for normative analysis of what institutional reforms might reduce the susceptibility of the new commissions to patronage capture.

Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism (Thelen, 1999; Pierson, 2004) provides a complementary analytical lens by directing attention to path dependency; the tendency for institutional trajectories to be shaped by decisions made at critical junctures, which create self-reinforcing feedback loops that make alternative paths increasingly difficult to pursue over time. Applied to Nigeria's development commissions, this framework suggests that the establishment of OMPADEC in 1993 created an institutional template encompassing mandate formulations, governance structures, funding mechanisms, and political logics that has been reproduced, with modifications, in each subsequent commission. The failures of each predecessor have not fundamentally altered the institutional template; instead, they have triggered successor institutions

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that inherit and reproduce the same pathologies.

This dynamic explains what might otherwise seem puzzling, why Nigeria continues to establish development commissions despite overwhelming evidence of their ineffectiveness. Path dependency theory suggests that once an institutional form is established, powerful vested interests such as the political elites who derive patronage benefits from these institutions mobilise to perpetuate it. In this context, the creation of commissions becomes a political currency, exchangeable for regional elite support, making institutional reform politically costly even when it is economically rational. Understanding Nigeria's commission proliferation through this lens is essential for identifying realistic pathways to reform.

Historical Context: The Evolution of Development Commissions in Nigeria

To understand the new commissions, it is necessary to trace the genealogy of the institutional form they represent. The history of development commissions in Nigeria is a history of deferred promise, institutional recycling, and systemic dysfunction a trajectory that shapes both the opportunities and the risks of the current proliferation.

The Niger Delta Development Board (1961) and OMPADEC (1993)

The Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB), established in 1961 in response to the Henry Willink Commission of 1958, was Nigeria's first formal experiment with a geographically targeted development agency. The Willink Commission had been established by the departing colonial administration to address minority fears of marginalisation in post-independence Nigeria, and one of its recommendations was the creation of a dedicated body to address the developmental challenges of the Niger Delta region. The NDDB was mandated to receive a 15% allocation of federal revenue for this purpose, but in practice the institution was severely underfunded, enjoyed limited operational autonomy, and was dominated by the political interests of the regional government (Obi, 2014, Ajayi, 2025).

The transition from the NDDB to OMPADEC in 1993 under the Babangida military administration represented both an acknowledgement of the former's failure and an attempt to reconstitute the institutional form with greater resources and a sharper mandate.

OMPADEC (Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission) was given a mandate to address both developmental and environmental challenges in oil-producing communities and was funded by a 3% derivation allocation from oil revenues. However, OMPADEC quickly became synonymous with corruption and mismanagement. Resources were channelled through political networks, contracts were awarded to politically connected firms without competitive tendering, and project execution was systematically compromised by collusion between commission staff and contractors (Ikelegbe, 2005). By 1999, OMPADEC was widely regarded as a developmental embarrassment and was dissolved by the Abdulsalami Abubakar transitional administration.

The NDDC (2000-Present): A Study in Institutional Persistence

The Niger Delta Development Commission, established by the Obasanjo administration in 2000, was explicitly designed to address the gaps and failures of its predecessor. The NDDC Act provided for a more elaborate governance structure, greater funding (15% of federation account allocations from the

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nine producing states, plus 3% of oil company budgets), and enhanced accountability mechanisms. Yet, as the foregoing analysis has demonstrated, the NDDC has replicated and in some respects amplified the pathologies of OMPADEC. Over ₦6 trillion received between 2001 and 2019 has not produced commensurate developmental outcomes in the Niger Delta, where multidimensional poverty stands at 62.6% according to the 2022 National Bureau of Statistics MPI survey report (NBS, 2022).

A commissioned forensic audit uncovered over 13,000 poorly executed or unverified projects (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019). The Auditor-General of the Federation documented the disappearance of ₦183 billion between 2008 and 2012 alone. Despite these findings, the NDDC's approved budget grew from ₦240 billion in 2010 to ₦1.91 trillion in 2024, a trajectory that suggests the commission's primary function is not developmental but rather political providing a mechanism for resource allocation to Niger Delta political elites as the price of their cooperation with successive federal administrations (Isumonah, 2013).

Regional Analysis of Nigeria's Six Development Commissions

The following section provides a critical appraisal of each of the six commissions, examining their mandate, governance structure, funding allocation, key appointments, and prospects for developmental effectiveness

North-East Development Commission (NEDC): An Early Test Case

The North-East Development Commission (NEDC), established in 2017, represents the first application of the geopolitical zone development commission model outside the Niger Delta context. Its creation was intended to address the profound humanitarian, economic, and developmental consequences of the Boko Haram insurgency across Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe states. The scale of the challenge confronting the commission is immense. More than a decade of insurgency resulted in widespread destruction of infrastructure, the collapse of agricultural livelihoods, mass displacement of populations, and severe disruptions to education and healthcare services. UNICEF (2022) estimates that the insurgency inflicted economic losses exceeding $100 billion over a thirteen-year period, while the region continues to record Nigeria's highest poverty rate at 76 per cent (NBS, 2022). Given these conditions, the political and developmental rationale for establishing the NEDC was considerably stronger than that of the regional commissions created subsequently.

The commission benefits from a relatively robust funding framework, including statutory allocations derived from 3 per cent of Value Added Tax (VAT) revenues and annual federal budget appropriations. Under the leadership of Paul C. Tarfa as Chairman and Mohammed Goni Alkali as Managing Director, the NEDC has reported the execution of more than 700 projects spanning infrastructure rehabilitation, educational restoration, humanitarian support, and community resettlement programmes. On paper, these interventions suggest a substantial institutional response to the region's developmental crisis.

However, the commission's institutional performance raises important questions about the effectiveness of the development commission model as a mechanism for regional transformation. A World Bank (2023) institutional assessment conducted in partnership with the commission itself,

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identified significant deficiencies in the commission's organizational architecture, noting a major gap in the quality of systems and processes required to fulfil its statutory mandate.

Specifically, the review highlighted weaknesses in human resource capacity, financial management systems, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, project oversight, and accountability mechanisms. These institutional shortcomings closely resemble the governance pathologies that have plagued earlier development commissions, particularly the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) (World bank report, 2021).

Beyond administrative weaknesses, the developmental outcomes of the commission remain difficult to reconcile with the scale of resources committed to it. Despite reported allocations exceeding ₦3 trillion since its establishment and the execution of hundreds of projects, the North-East remains the poorest region in Nigeria. Progress in poverty reduction, infrastructure recovery, durable resettlement of displaced populations, and broader socio-economic reconstruction has been limited. The persistence of insecurity in parts of the region further constrains implementation efforts and reduces the effectiveness of development interventions. Moreover, the commission has struggled to resolve the inherent tension between its emergency humanitarian responsibilities and its broader mandate for long-term structural development. This ambiguity has contributed to a portfolio of fragmented and often reactive interventions that lack the strategic coherence necessary to fundamentally alter the region's development trajectory (World bank report, 2021).

The experience of the NEDC is particularly significant because it tests the development commission model under circumstances where the need for intervention is both genuine and urgent. Yet, despite strong political and moral justification, substantial financial resources, and an extensive project portfolio, the commission has encountered many of the same institutional and governance challenges that undermined its predecessors. As such, the NEDC provides important evidence that the effectiveness of regional development commissions depends less on the creation of new institutions than on the broader political, administrative, and accountability environments within which they operate.

North-West Development Commission (NWDC)

The North-West Development Commission, enacted in 2024, covers Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara states. The most populous geopolitical zone in Nigeria and one characterised by extreme poverty, rapidly deteriorating security conditions, declining agricultural productivity, and a severe deficit in educational attainment, particularly for girls (NBS, 2022; UNICEF, 2023).

Led by Lawal Samaila Abdullahi as Chairman and Abdullahi Shehu Ma'aji as Managing Director, the NWDC is created to address the enormous developmental deficit of the North-West. Ma'aji, an academic, has articulated an ambitious vision for the commission centred on health, education, security-related livelihood support, and economic diversification. The commission's stated commitment to 'team-based' governance and collaborative planning is encouraging, though it remains aspirational at this early stage. The NWDC faces what may be the most complex developmental challenge of any of the six commissions.

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The North-West's poverty rate is among the highest in the country, and the commission must operate against a backdrop of escalating banditry and kidnapping, farmer-herder conflicts, and rapid demographic growth that is outpacing economic expansion (Shawai, 2025).

Its 2025 budget allocation of approximately ₦225 billion, like that of the other commissions is substantial but arguably inadequate relative to the depth of the region's developmental deficit. A fundamental structural problem is the commission's relationship with state governments, several of which including Kano, Kaduna, and Zamfara have their own ambitious development agendas with significant internally generated revenue. Clarifying the boundary between NWDC interventions and state government responsibilities will be critical to avoiding the duplication of projects and wastage of resources that has characterised NDDC operations. The absence of a formal co-governance mechanism that gives state governments a genuine stake in NWDC decision-making is a significant design flaw (Ajayi, 2025, Adio, 2025).

North-Central Development Commission (NCDC)

The North-Central Development Commission, assented to by President Tinubu in February 2025, covers Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau states, as well as the Federal Capital Territory. The North-Central zone is characterised by significant developmental heterogeneity. It includes states with relatively strong economic bases (Niger State, with its hydroelectric potential; Kwara, with growing internally generated revenue) alongside states characterised by acute poverty and persistent farmer-herder conflict (Benue, Plateau). Cosmas Akiyir serves as Chairman of the NCDC, with Cyril Tsenyil Yiltsen as Managing Director. The board composition reflects careful attention to federal character principles, with representation from all member states. This is important for political legitimacy but risks producing governance by committee, a dynamic in which decisions are driven by the imperative of distributing resources equitably among state delegations rather than by strategic developmental logic.

The North-Central commission faces the particularly delicate challenge of navigating its mandate alongside the pre-existing HYPPADEC (Hydroelectric Power Producing Areas Development Commission), which was established in 2010 and covers ten states across three geopolitical zones, including several North-Central states. The potential for mandate overlap and resource duplication between these two commissions is substantial and has not been adequately addressed in the NCDC enabling legislation. More broadly, the North-Central zone's inclusion of the FCT raises fundamental questions about the commission's mandate. Abuja's developmental status and resource base are fundamentally different from those of the surrounding states, and its inclusion risks distorting both the commission's resource allocation logic and its poverty-reduction focus.

South-East Development Commission (SEDC)

The South-East Development Commission, established in 2024, covers Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states, the five predominantly Igbo-speaking states of south-eastern Nigeria and led by Emeka Atuma as Chairman and Mark Okoye as Managing Director. The South-East is one of the most economically dynamic zones in Nigeria, home to a highly entrepreneurial

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population with significant diaspora remittances, dense networks of small and medium enterprises, and growing urban centres. Yet it is also a zone characterised by acute infrastructure deficits particularly roads that constrain the realisation of its economic potential, as well as persistent security challenges related to separatist agitation and the activities of criminal gangs. The South-East's political context adds an additional layer of complexity. The commission's establishment has been welcomed by some as a signal of federal responsiveness to longstanding South-East grievances about developmental neglect and political marginalisation, grievances that have historically fuelled separatist sentiment.

If the commission is perceived to be delivering genuine developmental dividends, it could contribute to political stabilisation. If, conversely, it is seen as a patronage mechanism that benefits political elites while leaving ordinary citizens unreached, it could deepen grievances and delegitimise the federal government's development rhetoric. The SEDC's most pressing challenge may be the security situation. The activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and affiliated groups have created a security environment in which infrastructure projects face systematic sabotage and community engagement is severely constrained. This security constraint, which is largely absent from the commission's enabling legislation, may prove the most significant obstacle to its effectiveness.

The recent parliamentary scrutiny of the South East Development Commission (SEDC) exposed a fundamental contradiction at the heart of Nigeria's regional development commissions. Rather than demonstrating significant investments in projects capable of transforming the region, the Commission found itself defending expenditures largely concentrated on headquarters rehabilitation, liaison offices, personnel costs, consultancies, and stakeholder engagements rather than tangible developmental interventions. While the leadership justified these expenses as necessary for institution-building, the parliamentary hearing raised a more troubling question, why do agencies created to deliver development so often prioritise building bureaucracies? The controversy reflects a broader concern in the political economy of regional development agencies in Nigeria, where significant public resources are absorbed by overheads, consultancies, office infrastructure, and administrative expansion, creating the risk that commission’s function more as patronage-distribution mechanisms than as effective vehicles for addressing the structural development deficits that necessitated their establishment (Agbajileke, 2026).

South-South Development Commission (SSDC)

The South-South Development Commission is arguably the most politically contested of the six commissions, for the simple reason that the Niger Delta Development Commission already exists to serve a substantially overlapping constituency. The nine states covered by the NDDC include six of the South-South states (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers) plus Abia, Imo, and Ondo. The SSDC's proponent, Godswill Akpabio, has sought to distinguish the two commissions by characterising the NDDC as a 'resource-based' commission focused on oil-related environmental and developmental challenges, and the SSDC as a broader 'development' commission for the zone as a whole (Etim, 2024; Williams, 2024).

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Under the leadership of ChibudomNwuche as Chairman and Usoro Offiong Akpabio as Managing Director, the SSDC begins its operational existence under a cloud of structural ambiguity. The relationship between the SSDC and the NDDC has not been clearly delineated in either institution's enabling legislation, creating the conditions for the very duplication of mandates and wastage of resources that has historically plagued Nigerian development institutions. Critics have argued, with considerable force, that the SSDC's creation is primarily a political response to lobbying by South-South elites who felt excluded from NDDC patronage networks, rather than a response to any genuine developmental gap that could not be addressed by the existing institutional architecture (Fasan, 2024).

The South-South geopolitical zone presents one of the most striking manifestations of the resource curse in Nigeria. The coexistence of immense oil wealth with persistent poverty, environmental degradation, and underdevelopment (Watts, 2004). Despite accounting for the bulk of the country's petroleum production and generating substantial revenues for the national economy over several decades, the region continues to experience severe socio-economic deprivation, with multidimensional poverty estimated at 62.6 per cent (NBS, 2022). This enduring paradox underscores the limitations of resource abundance as a driver of development in the absence of effective governance and accountable institutions. Against this backdrop, the creation of an additional development commission to address the region's challenges raises important concerns. Without first confronting the governance deficiencies, accountability failures, and institutional weaknesses that have enabled existing intervention agencies to absorb trillions of naira with limited demonstrable developmental outcomes, the establishment of another commission risks reproducing and potentially deepening the very dysfunctions it is intended to remedy. Rather than resolving the region's developmental challenges, such institutional proliferation merely create additional layers of bureaucracy, rent-seeking opportunities, and administrative fragmentation.

South-West Development Commission (SWDC)

The South-West Development Commission, covering Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo states, is in several respects the most anomalous of the six commissions. The South-West is Nigeria's most economically developed zone, home to the commercial capital Lagos, the most industrialised state in the country, and a relatively functional state-level institutional infrastructure. Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) in Lagos State alone exceeds that of most other states combined, and the South-West has a longer tradition of developmentally oriented governance philosophy than any other zone. Olubunmi Adetunmbi chairs the SWDC, with Charles Akindiji Akinola as Managing Director. The commission has been welcomed by some South-West political actors as an equity measure, ensuring that the zone receives federal institutional attention comparable to that now extended to other regions. It has also been framed by some as a potential complement to the Developmental Agenda for Western Nigeria (DAWN) Commission, a state-funded regional development body established by the South-West governors.

The DAWN Commission analogy is instructive. Unlike the federally appointed development commissions, DAWN is owned and funded by the six South-West state governments, making it genuinely accountable to the subnational governments

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it serves rather than to federal political principals. DAWN has demonstrated a capacity for strategic planning and coordination that has been notably absent from federally appointed commissions. If the SWDC is to add genuine value rather than merely duplicating DAWN's functions, it must find a differentiated niche whether in infrastructure investment, environmental management, or specific sectoral interventions that leverages federal resources in a way that complements rather than duplicate state-level developmental efforts. The strongest justification for the SWDC may lie in the zones's sub-regional disparities. While Lagos and Ogun are economically dynamic, Ekiti and Osun face significant fiscal challenges and developmental constraints that justify targeted federal attention. If the SWDC can direct its resources toward the less developed states within the zone rather than allowing political patronage dynamics to equalise distributions regardless of need, it may be able to make a meaningful contribution to intra-zonal equity.

Conclusion

The establishment of Nigeria's six regional development commissions reflects a recognition that the country's developmental challenges are unevenly distributed and require region-specific interventions. From post-conflict reconstruction in the North-East to environmental degradation in the South-South, insecurity in the North-West, infrastructure deficits in the North-Central, and the economic aspirations of the South-East and South-West, the problems these commissions seek to address are both real and urgent. However, Nigeria's experience with development commissions demonstrates that good intentions alone do not guarantee developmental outcomes. Weak accountability, overlapping mandates, political patronage, opaque procurement processes, and unstable funding arrangements have repeatedly transformed institutions created for development into vehicles for elite accumulation. Without deliberate reforms, the new commissions risk reproducing the same cycle of underperformance that has characterised many of their predecessors. To avoid this outcome, the commissions must be guided by clear and measurable mandates, stronger accountability mechanisms, transparent financial management, and meaningful collaboration with state governments and local stakeholders. Equally important is the need to rationalise overlapping institutional structures, particularly where duplication threatens efficiency and effectiveness. Beyond these immediate reforms, policymakers must confront a deeper question: whether development commissions should remain permanent bureaucratic fixtures or serve as transitional mechanisms toward greater regional autonomy and developmental governance. Ultimately, the success of these commissions will not be judged by the promises made at their inauguration but by their ability to deliver roads, schools, jobs, security, and economic opportunities to the citizens they were created to serve. Nigeria does not suffer from a shortage of development institutions; it suffers from a shortage of institutions that work. Unless governance, accountability, and performance become the defining principles of these commissions, they risk becoming yet another chapter in the country's long history of ambitious institutions with disappointing outcomes.

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