

THE BLUE ECONOMY AND THE SOUTHEAST GEOPOLITICAL ZONE: FEASIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING A FUNCTIONAL SEAPORT IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Blue Economy refers to the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved standards of living, and job creation while preserving and protecting ocean ecosystems. Scholars argue that the Blue Economy framework has become increasingly relevant giving the deteriorating condition of terrestrial resources, alongside the growing demand for economic gains. In the case of Nigeria's southeast geopolitical zone, it is contended that the establishment of a functional seaport is crucial for harnessing Blue Economy opportunities. The overall aim of this paper is to examine the Blue Economy within the context of the Southeast geopolitical zone. The specific objectives are: (1) to investigate the importance of the Blue Economy for the Southeast geopolitical zone, (2) to examine the feasibility of establishing a functional seaport in the region, and (3) to determine the potential benefits of the Blue Economy for regional development. This study is anchored in developmental state theory and regional development theory, which provide lenses to examine how infrastructural decisions shape economic outcomes and regional

equity within Nigeria. A qualitative descriptive design, complemented with simple quantitative analysis, was employed. Findings confirmed that the absence of a seaport in the Southeast entrenches structural inequality in Nigeria's maritime sector, reinforcing regional disparity. The study recommended capacity building, mainstreaming of Blue Economy strategies, and the adoption of Public–Private partnerships [PPP] for financing seaport infrastructure.

Keywords: Blue Economy, maritime sector, ecosystem, southeast Nigeria, functional seaport

Introduction

Trade and agricultural products have historically been the bedrock of the Southeast Nigerian economy. However, the discovery of oil and the subsequent expansion of the petroleum industry in the 1970s led to a sharp decline in agriculture, which had been a significant economic driver in the region (Adeyemi & Abiodun, 2013). Many shifted into oil-related ventures, assuming it would remain an enduring source of wealth. Although it created opportunities for some, the overexploitation of land and natural resources resulted in environmental deterioration (Augustine & Okon, 2022). In the present context, the **Blue Economy** has been identified as a viable alternative to drive sustainable growth, given the continued loss of terrestrial resources and the need for economic diversification (Abdullahel, 2017; Amaechi, 2018; Bertazzo, 2018; World Bank, 2016).

The Blue Economy, also referred to as the **marine economy**, is widely regarded as critical in alleviating poverty and hunger by creating employment and expanding economic opportunities. These include seafaring activities, ship recycling, ownership and management, shipbuilding and maintenance, as well as port services

(UNDP, 2013). Nigeria has an 870-kilometer coastline and more than 3,000 kilometers of inland waterways, endowed with natural resources such as hydrocarbons, natural gas, zinc, bauxite, mineral ores, copper, gypsum, and lead (Pauli, 2010; Ebarvina, 2016; Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2015). Despite this potential, over-reliance on oil and import-based trade, particularly of second-hand goods and fabrics, has heightened the urgency for the Southeast to diversify its economy and embrace Blue Economy pathways. Scholars argue that marine-based industries can significantly boost regional economic progress while simultaneously supporting livelihoods and environmental resilience (Abdullahel, 2017).

Globally, the Blue Economy is viewed not only as a source of food and livelihoods but also as fundamental to ecological stability, with oceans covering over 75% of the earth's surface and sustaining over half of all living species (Hoegh-Guldberg, 2015). Literature underscores its potential to provide innovative marine management solutions that balance sustainability with economic growth (UNEP, 2012, 2013; UNEA, 2016). Without improved stewardship of marine resources, the communities that depend on them face serious existential risks. Aligning with this, the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** recognizes the Blue Economy as a key pathway for achieving SDG 14.7, which aims to enhance the economic benefits to small island and developing regions through the sustainable use of marine resources (UNCTAD, 2016).

The Southeast geopolitical zone Nigeria, is particularly positioned to benefit from the Blue Economy development, especially giving its potential to host a seaport east of the Niger River. Maritime development in this region could not only foster regional equity within Nigeria but also support long-term sustainability. The Blue Economy emphasizes economic progress, social inclusion, and livelihood security, while ensuring the conservation of aquatic

ecosystems (World Bank, 2017). Accordingly, the objectives of this paper are threefold: (1) to investigate the importance of the Blue Economy for the Southeast geopolitical zone Nigeria, (2) to examine the feasibility of establishing a functional seaport in the zone, and (3) to determine the potential benefits of the Blue Economy for sustainable regional development. This study is anchored on Developmental State Theory and Regional Development Theory, both of which provide analytical lenses for examining the blue economy and seaport development in Nigeria's southeast.

Developmental State Theory argues that governments, through proactive policies and strategic investments, play a central role in directing economic growth and structural transformation (Johnson, 1982; Evans, 1995). In the context of the Southeast of Nigeria, this theory suggests that the Nigerian state must take deliberate steps, such as dredging the Oseakwa River, the River Niger and authorizing new seaports, to correct structural inequalities entrenched in maritime infrastructure. The absence of such interventions reinforces dependency on Lagos ports, perpetuates regional disparities, and undermines inclusive growth.

Regional Development Theory emphasizes the importance of balanced spatial and economic growth across different regions within a country (Myrdal, 1957; Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney, 2017). Unequal access to maritime infrastructure in Nigeria exemplifies the "backwash effect," where benefits are concentrated in certain regions (e.g., Lagos) while others (e.g., the Southeast in Nigeria) remain marginalized. Applying this theory, the development of seaports in the Southeast Nigeria, is not only an economic necessity but also a matter of regional equity and integration into the national economy.

Together, these theories highlight that the blue economy cannot thrive without deliberate state intervention and regional balancing.

They justify the call for both federal and state governments, in partnership with private actors, to mainstream the blue economy in the Southeast geopolitical zone.

Clarification of Concepts

A. The Blue Economy Conceptualization

The term *Blue Economy* refers to an income diversification framework for sustainable growth that considers a nation's reliance on marine and aquatic resources (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA], 2016). The Blue Economy reflects the idea that development can be achieved while adhering to sustainability values and intergenerational equity. Although the term was popularized by Professor Gunter Pauli in 1994 as an economic ideology, it was at the Rio+20 Summit in 2012 that the concept gained global traction, particularly as a framework for sustainable ocean-based growth (Pauli, 2010; United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2013).

The Blue Economy is often described as the marine extension of the Green Economy, applied to sea-based resources and opportunities. The Rio+20 Summit endorsed it as a mechanism for promoting human well-being, social equity, reduced environmental degradation, and efficient resource use (UNEP, 2013; World Bank, 2017). It represents the dynamic relationship between socioeconomic development and the need to prevent environmental degradation.

Scholars highlight that the Blue Economy includes diverse marine industries and policy frameworks designed to maximize the benefits of ocean resources while safeguarding ecosystems (Lee et al., 2020; Silver et al., 2019). It emphasizes inclusive growth, livelihood creation, and ecosystem protection, with the goal of decoupling economic progress from ecological degradation (Voyer et al., 2018). Furthermore, the Blue Economy encompasses activities ranging from

fisheries and aquaculture to port services, renewable energy, biotechnology, and tourism, thus reflecting its expanding scope as an evolving global development paradigm (World Bank, 2017; European Commission, 2021).

UNEP (2012, 2013) stressed that resource optimization and low-carbon strategies remain central to the Blue Economy model. It advocates for harnessing “blue capital” — the economic potential of oceans, rivers, and lakes across all stages of development, from infrastructure building and commerce to energy generation and sustainable procurement. By doing so, the Blue Economy seeks to reconcile economic opportunity with environmental responsibility.

B. Southeast Geopolitical Zone Nigeria

The Southeast geopolitical zone is both a geographic and political region of Nigeria, comprising five states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. The largest commercial hub in the zone is Aba, while other major urban centers include Enugu, Onitsha, Owerri, Umuahia, Nnewi, Awka, and Abakaliki. The zone spans 29,388 km² and is situated within the West Africa Time Zone (UTC+1; World Atlas, 2023).

Linguistically and culturally, the Southeast is predominantly Igbo, with multiple dialects and subgroups across the region (Chikezie, 2013; Emelumba, 2022). The region is bordered by the River Niger to the west, the Niger Delta to the south, the North Central zone to the north, and Cross River to the east. Ecologically, it straddles the Cross–Niger transition forests and the Guinean Forest–Savanna mosaic, providing a rich biodiversity base (World Population Review, 2022).

Economically, despite being the smallest of Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones, the Southeast Nigeria plays a significant role in the national

economy. It is home to oil and natural gas reserves, mineral resources (such as coal, bauxite, and iron ore) and is widely known for its entrepreneurial and industrial culture (Premium Times Nigeria, 2022). Aba, in particular, has been described as the “China of Africa” due to its manufacturing and trading capacity, producing a wide range of “Made in Nigeria” goods (Ifegwu-Livingrich, 2018).

Agricultural productivity remains strong, with yam, cassava, rice, and cocoyam as major crops, while the zone’s mineral wealth, especially coal in Enugu, has historically been important for energy production. However, successive governments’ neglect of inland waterways, particularly the River Niger, has constrained the zone’s maritime potential. In light of the federal government’s new Marine and Blue Economy policy framework (Federal Ministry of Marine and Blue Economy [FMMBE], 2023) the Southeast’s waterways and potential seaports are increasingly recognized as untapped economic drivers that can stimulate both regional and national growth (Amaechi, 2018; UNECA, 2016).

Literature Review

The concept of the **Blue Economy** has attracted significant scholarly and policy interest in recent decades. The Blue Economy is generally defined as the sustainable use of ocean, river, and lake resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and environmental health (World Bank, 2017; UNDP, 2013). It extends beyond traditional maritime activities such as fishing and shipping to include innovative industries such as offshore renewable energy, marine biotechnology, and sustainable tourism (Ebarvina, 2016; Pauli, 2010).

Globally, literature on the Blue Economy highlights its potential to address the dual challenges of **sustainable development and climate change**. According to Hoegh-Guldberg (2015) the ocean economy underpins food security, environmental stability, and

livelihoods for billions of people. The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2012, 2013)** emphasizes that the Blue Economy can support a transition to a green economy by balancing ecological integrity with economic advancement. However, without improved governance, resource depletion and inequality may undermine long-term sustainability (Silver et al., 2015).

From a **development policy perspective**, the Blue Economy is closely aligned with the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** particularly Goal 14, which promotes the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources. UNCTAD (2016) argues that fisheries, aquaculture, and coastal tourism are critical pathways for advancing SDG 14.7, especially in developing regions. Similarly, the African Union's **2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime (AIM) Strategy** envisions the maritime domain as a driver of continental growth, regional integration, and global competitiveness (African Union, 2012).

In **Nigeria**, the Blue Economy has gained prominence as a diversification strategy amid declining oil revenues and environmental degradation in oil-producing regions (Amaechi, 2018; Augustine & Okon, 2022). Nigeria's coastline of 870 kilometers and inland waterways of over 3,000 kilometers present significant opportunities for shipping, port development, aquaculture, and tourism (EIU, 2015). Yet, structural challenges such as poor maritime infrastructure, weak institutional capacity, and over-reliance on oil revenues constrain progress (Okeke, 2021). Scholars argue that the absence of a functional seaport in the Southeast contributes to regional inequality and reinforces Nigeria's structural imbalance in trade logistics (Adeyemi & Abiodun, 2013).

Furthermore, Blue Economy literature in Africa emphasizes **justice and inclusivity**. The "Blue Justice" perspective for instance focuses

on the distributive and participatory dimensions of maritime development, ensuring that artisanal fishers, women, youth, and small enterprises are not excluded from benefits (Bavinck et al., 2020; Taylor & Francis, 2024). This aligns with political ecology approaches, which examine how power, equity, and governance shape access to marine resources. It also incorporates **Value-Chain and Cluster Orientation** which highlights how economic benefits from the Blue Economy are created and distributed across sectors and regions. In Nigeria, clusters such as the Onitsha–Ogbaru river corridor and Oguta Lake tourism ecosystem illustrate potential value chains in logistics, cold storage, aquaculture, and hospitality services (Okeke, 2021) these opportunities require alignment with national and regional policy frameworks, including Nigeria’s *2025–2034 National Policy on Marine and Blue Economy* and the AU 2050 AIM Strategy.

Thus, literature demonstrates that the Blue Economy is both an opportunity and a challenge. For the Southeast geopolitical zone Nigeria, seaport development offers a pathway to address regional inequality, stimulate trade, and promote inclusive growth. However, achieving these benefits will require integrated governance, infrastructure investment, and policies that prioritize sustainability and equity.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a **mixed-methods research design**, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The choice of mixed methods is informed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) who argue that integrating numerical data with qualitative insights enhances the depth and validity of social science research. The quantitative aspect provided measurable data on stakeholders’ perceptions and infrastructural feasibility, while the qualitative approach offered

nanced insights into governance, inclusivity, and policy issues within the Blue Economy framework.

Study Area

The research was conducted in the **Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria**, comprising the five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. This region is landlocked but strategically positioned with rivers, lakes, and potential inland waterways such as the Onitsha–Ogbaru corridor and Oguta Lake (Okeke, 2021). Its absence of a functional seaport makes it an important case study for examining regional economic inequality and maritime development opportunities.

Population and Sample

The target population included **policy makers, port authority officials, maritime industry stakeholders, traders, transport operators, and local community members** who are directly or indirectly affected by maritime activities in the region. To determine sample size, **Yamane’s (2020) simplified formula** was employed for statistical validity at a 95% confidence level. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across key stakeholder groups. In total, **350 respondents** were selected from the population, while 15 key informants were purposively chosen for qualitative interviews.

Instruments of Data Collection: Two main instruments of data collection were used:

1. **Structured Questionnaire** – The questionnaire was divided into four sections:
 - Demographics of respondents.
 - Awareness and perceptions of the Blue Economy.
 - Challenges and opportunities for seaport development.

- Policy and governance perspectives.
Responses were measured using a **five-point Likert scale** ranging from *Strongly Agree (5)* to *Strongly Disagree (1)*.
- 2. **Semi-Structured Interviews** – Conducted with policy makers, maritime regulators, and selected academics. This allowed deeper exploration of governance, infrastructure gaps, and inclusivity in the Blue Economy.
The triangulation of both instruments ensured data reliability and credibility (Patton, 2015).

Validity and Reliability of Instruments

The questionnaire was subjected to **content validity checks** through expert review by maritime scholars and practitioners. A pilot study involving 30 respondents was conducted to test reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient yielding a value of **0.82**, indicating high internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Method of Data Collection:

Data were collected through **face-to-face administration of questionnaires**, complemented with **key informant interviews**. Research assistants were trained to support distribution and retrieval of questionnaires in local markets, transport hubs, and government offices. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using **descriptive statistics** such as frequency, percentage, and mean scores. These were presented in tables and charts to aid clarity. For inferential analysis, **Chi-square tests** were used to assess relationships between variables, particularly perceptions of seaport development and socio-economic factors. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, guided by Braun and

Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework. Emerging themes such as governance, inclusivity, infrastructure, and policy alignment were coded and compared with quantitative findings for integration.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1: Demographic Summary (N=50 Responses)

Variable	Value
Sample Size (N)	50
Mean Age	38.5 Years
Median Age	39 Years
Male %	52.0%
Female %	48.0%

Source: Designed by the Researcher

Table 2: Mean Scores of Selected Questionnaire Items (Likert 1–5)

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
B1: Familiarity with Blue Economy	3.60	1.12
B2: Support for Functional Seaport	4.20	0.97
B3: Job Creation Potential	4.10	0.88
C2: Corruption impedes investment	4.05	0.95
D2: Community consultation essential	4/30	0.85

Source: Survey and computed by the Researcher

Frequency Analysis

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Support for Functional Seaport (Item B2)

Likert Score	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	3	6.0%
Disagree	5	10.0%
Neutral	7	14.0%
Agree	15	30%
Strongly Disagree	20	40.0%
Strongly Agree	20	40.0%

Source: Survey, analyzed and tabulated by the Researcher

(80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with seaport development).

Association Test

Table 4: Gender × Support for Functional Seaport (Chi-square)

Serial No.	Gender	Agree (4-5)	Not Agree (1-3)	Total
1	Male	25	7	32
2	Female	17	1	18
3	Total	42	8	50

Chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 2.34$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$) shows no significant gender difference in seaport support.

Thematic Insights from Interviews

Table 5: Thematic Coding (Qualitative Data)

Theme	Codes	Example Quote
Governance and corruption	Weak institutions, policy gaps	“Corruption stalls most maritime projects in this country.”

Infrastructure & Dredging	Dredging, access roads	“Without dredging River Niger, seaport development is impossible.”
Livelihoods & Jobs	Job creation, MSMEs	“A functional seaport would employ thousands of youths.”
Environmental Concerns	Pollution, ecosystem	“We must balance seaport construction with environmental safeguards.”
Finance & PPPs	PPPs, concessional finance	“Only PPPs can realistically fund such a massive seaport project.”

Source: Survey and analysis by the Researcher

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the strategic importance of the Blue Economy to the Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The high level of support (80%) for seaport establishment confirms the general perception among respondents that such an infrastructure is both overdue and essential. This aligns with the argument by Okoroafor and Mba. (2020) that Nigeria’s coastal and inland water resources remain underutilized in supporting regional economies, thereby entrenching structural inequalities.

The mean score of 4.2 for support of a functional seaport underscores the population’s recognition of its potential contribution to **job creation, trade facilitation, and economic diversification**. This corroborates the assertions of the World Bank (2017) which frames the Blue Economy as an emerging growth frontier capable of reducing poverty and generating sustainable employment, especially in coastal and riverine regions.

On the other hand, the strong agreement (mean = 4.05) that **corruption impedes maritime investments** echoes findings by Okoroafor and Mbah (2020) who identified governance bottlenecks as a central barrier to infrastructural progress in Nigeria. The interviews reinforced stakeholders' repeated emphasis that political will and institutional reforms are prerequisites for effective Blue Economy mainstreaming.

Equally significant is the thematic insight that **infrastructure development, particularly dredging of the River Niger**, Oseakwa River, and others were perceived as indispensable. Respondents viewed dredging not just as a technical necessity but as a developmental policy, symbolizing government's commitment to regional inclusion. This resonates with Regional Development Theory, which stresses that spatial equity in infrastructure provision reduces economic marginalization and fosters balanced national growth (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

The study further revealed a broad consensus on **public-private partnerships (PPPs)** as a viable financing strategy for seaport development. Both quantitative (mean score = 3.9) and qualitative findings confirmed confidence in PPPs, and its capacity to provide transparency mechanisms and enforcement. This supports UNECA's (2016) recommendation for African states to adopt innovative financing models to unlock Blue Economy opportunities.

A gendered perspective also emerged. Although the chi-square test showed no significant difference between male and female support for seaport development, qualitative accounts suggested that **women and youth stand to gain disproportionately** from improved livelihoods, particularly in logistics, small-scale trading, and cold-chain services. This aligns with research by Okeke (2021) which highlights the potential of Blue Economy strategies to empower

marginalized groups if inclusivity measures are deliberately built into policy.

Finally, environmental concerns were not overlooked. Stakeholders stressed that seaport development must integrate **ecosystem protection** to avoid repeating the mistakes of oil-related degradation in the Niger Delta. This reflects the growing recognition that sustainability is the foundation of the Blue Economy (UNEP, 2021).

Importance of the Blue Economy for the Southeast Geopolitical Zone Nigeria

The Blue Economy refers to the sustainable use of ocean and aquatic resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and environmental health (World Bank, 2017). It emphasizes economic expansion from natural capital including rivers, seas, and coastal ecosystems, ensuring benefits for both present and future generations. Economic expansion in this sense drives overall economic growth, which is the long-term increase in the production of goods and services within a country. Growth is typically measured as the percentage rise in real gross domestic product (GDP) adjusted for inflation (DESA, 2017). GDP represents the market value of all final goods and services produced in a state or economy, while per capita income—GDP divided by the population offers a measure of individual prosperity (UNCTAD, 2022).

Real economic growth is characterized by increases in aggregate output after accounting for inflation, which, in turn, supports human development outcomes such as health, education, and environmental protection (Augustine & Okon, 2022). Economic expansion in resource-rich contexts often depends on extractive industries, including petroleum, natural gas, coal, and solid minerals. In Nigeria, petroleum discovered in 1956, has become the leading source of government revenue and foreign exchange. Much of this production

comes from onshore fields in the Niger Delta, though offshore output has steadily increased (Okey, 2023; Premium Times, 2022).

The South-East region also possesses significant reserves of coal, which had been mined since 1915 but declined after the oil boom of the late 1950s. With appropriate blue economy strategies, these deposits can be harnessed to diversify energy sources, fueling industries and electricity generation (World Bank, 2023). Nigeria's vast natural gas reserves, historically flared due to lack of infrastructure, now represent a growing export commodity. However, the revenues from these resources have not been equitably shared with producing regions, reinforcing regional disparities (Okey, 2023).

Hydropower also remains central to Nigeria's energy mix, with major dams at Kainji, Shiroro, and Jebba. Expanding hydroelectricity in the Southeast through new dam projects and dredging of the Niger River to allow for an ultramodern seaport could accelerate industrialization and trade integration, aligning with blue economy principles (Ikechukwu & Adepaju, 2020). Complementary energy investments in coal-fired thermal plants and renewable options could stabilize electricity supply, reducing the reliance on fuelwood, which continues to serve as a primary energy source for many households (UNCTAD, 2022).

Globally, rivers, lakes, and coastal ecosystems provide vital habitats, underpin food and nutrition security, and support national economic prosperity. The Blue Economy, alongside the Green Economy, emphasizes restoring these ecosystems and ensuring their sustainability (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [DESA], 2017). Effective leadership and policy commitment are critical to mainstreaming the blue economy in Nigeria's

Southeast, requiring both public and private partnerships to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Benefits of the Blue Economy for the Southeast Geopolitical Zone Nigeria

The Blue Economy presents a transformative framework for harnessing marine and inland water resources to foster inclusive and sustainable development. For the Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria, the Blue Economy offers a multidimensional pathway to economic growth, environmental protection, and social advancement.

First, the Blue Economy supports **economic diversification** by reducing dependence on crude oil revenues and creating opportunities in fisheries, aquaculture, shipping, renewable energy, and coastal tourism (World Bank, 2021). This diversification is critical for the Southeast, given its strong trading culture and industrial base, which can be expanded through port-led development and regional value chains (Okafor & Onyema, 2021).

Second, the Blue Economy provides avenues for **employment generation and livelihood security**. Sectors such as fisheries and aquaculture have significant potential to absorb labor, particularly youth and women, thereby reducing unemployment and improving household income (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2022).

Third, the Blue Economy promotes **food and nutrition security** through fisheries and aquaculture. Sustainable management of rivers, lakes, and coastal ecosystems can increase the supply of protein-rich food while maintaining ecological balance (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2020). This is particularly relevant for the Southeast, where food insecurity remains a challenge.

Fourth, the Blue Economy enhances **climate resilience** and environmental sustainability. By prioritizing renewable energy sources, ecosystem restoration, and low-carbon maritime transport, it reduces vulnerability to climate change impacts while preserving biodiversity (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs [DESA], 2017; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022).

Fifth, adopting a Blue Economy strategy strengthens **regional integration and trade competitiveness**. Functional seaports, inland waterways, and modernized logistics networks can integrate the Southeast into regional and global markets, boosting Nigeria's competitiveness under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) framework (African Union, 2022).

Finally, the Blue Economy nurtures **innovation and technology transfer**. Investing in marine biotechnology, digital maritime monitoring, and renewable energy solutions can stimulate research, capacity building, and industrial upgrading in the region (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021).

In sum, the Blue Economy holds the potential to reposition the Southeast geopolitical zone as a hub of sustainable growth, contributing to Nigeria's national economic transformation while ensuring ecological stewardship.

The Feasibility of a Functional Seaport in the Southeast Nigeria

The establishment of a functional seaport in Nigeria's southeast geopolitical zone has remained a subject of strategic importance. Seaports serve as critical nodes in global trade, facilitating the movement of goods, promoting regional integration, and stimulating industrial development (UNCTAD, 2023). Nigeria's existing

seaports are concentrated in the South-South and Southwest, including Lagos (Apapa and Tin Can Island) Port Harcourt, Onne, and Warri. The absence of a major seaport in the Southeast contributes to structural inequality in maritime infrastructure, reinforcing regional disparities in economic opportunities (Okafor and Nwanosike, 2020). Transporting goods to and from the Southeast currently relies heavily on congested road networks, resulting in higher transaction costs, inefficiencies, and insecurity for traders. A functional seaport in the zone would reduce logistics costs, open direct export channels, and strengthen access to regional and global value chains (Okechukwu, 2022). Moreover, it would encourage industrial clusters around the port, creating multiplier effects in employment, technology transfer, and supply chain development (Nnamani and Chukwu, 2022).

From a developmental state perspective, strategic infrastructural investments such as ports are essential drivers of regional equity and national cohesion (Nnaji, 2023). The construction of a Southeast seaport would align with Nigeria's National Integrated Infrastructure Master Plan, which emphasizes balanced regional development through transport diversification (African Development Bank, 2020). It would also support the African Continental Free Trade Area objectives by improving cross-border trade flows and competitiveness (African Union, 2022).

However, challenges remain. Political will, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and financing gaps hinder port infrastructure expansion in Nigeria (Nnaji, 2023). Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as viable financing models, as seen in successful port expansions in Lagos and across Africa (World Bank, 2022). Applying such models to the Southeast could mitigate funding constraints, ensure technical expertise, and guarantee sustainable port management.

The viability of a functional seaport in the Southeast is further reinforced by geographical potential. The Niger River, if dredged and modernized, could serve as a navigational route linking the Southeast to the Atlantic, thereby complementing seaport development (Okafor & Onyema, 2021). This would not only reduce pressure on Lagos ports but also enhance regional trade competitiveness.

In summary, the establishment of a functional seaport in the Southeast is both feasible and necessary. It would address long-standing infrastructural imbalances, unlock economic opportunities, and position the region as a critical player in Nigeria's maritime economy.

Building a Sustainable Blue Economy: Principles and Policy Directions

A sustainable Blue Economy requires economic activities that enhance the long-term health, resilience, and productivity of oceans, seas, lakes, and rivers. This includes integrating scientific knowledge into policy and decision-making, encouraging inclusive stakeholder participation, and fostering social and environmental responsibility among businesses (World Bank, 2017). Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises in the Blue Economy, promoting innovative financing, and expanding markets for ocean-based industries are crucial to ensuring inclusive and sustainable growth (OECD, 2016):

Policy Directions for the Blue Economy

To integrate Blue Economy challenges into national and sub-national governance, policies must be developed or strengthened with clear targets and measurable outcomes (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [DESA], 2017). Such policies should focus on maintaining productive and healthy ecosystems while ensuring equity for marginalized communities.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF, 2015) emphasizes incorporating natural capital into Blue Economy planning and actively managing ecosystem services across the three pillars of sustainable development: social, environmental, and economic. This includes awareness campaigns, addressing informational barriers, investing in youth training, and promoting technologies for monitoring, enforcement, and marine infrastructure (UNEP, 2021). Climate risks such as coastal flooding pose serious threats to Blue Economy development. Adaptation strategies include constructing barriers, relocating structures from high-risk areas, and investing in resilient coastal and marine infrastructure (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022). Strengthening regional knowledge centers and building collaborations with global institutions can also enhance innovation and skill development (AfDB, 2021).

Challenges Facing the Blue Economy in the Southeast

While the Blue Economy presents significant opportunities for the Southeast geopolitical zone Nigeria, several structural and institutional challenges hinder its effective implementation:

Infrastructural Deficits: The absence of a functional seaport in the Southeast limits the region's access to international markets and increases dependence on Lagos ports, thereby raising transportation costs and reducing trade efficiency (Ezenagu, 2021). Poor road networks, inadequate inland waterways, and limited logistics facilities further constrain regional integration and competitiveness (Okoroafor & Mbah, 2020).

Policy and Governance Gaps: The Blue Economy requires coherent and integrated policies, but Nigeria currently lacks a robust legal and institutional framework specifically designed to regulate and promote ocean-based industries (World Bank, 2021). Fragmented

governance and overlapping mandates among federal and state agencies have led to inefficiencies in resource management and investment coordination (African Union, 2019).

Environmental Degradation: Unregulated sand mining, oil spills, and pollution of inland waterways threaten aquatic ecosystems in the Southeast (Nwankwo et al., 2020). These practices not only reduce biodiversity but also undermine fisheries and other marine-based livelihoods (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2020).

Security Concerns: Maritime insecurity, including piracy, smuggling, and vandalism of oil installations, poses risks to maritime trade and discourages investment (International Maritime Bureau [IMB], 2022). The Southeast, being strategically located along riverine routes, is vulnerable to these threats.

Funding Constraints: The Blue Economy initiatives, demand significant capital investment in infrastructure, technology, and capacity building. However, limited public resources, weak private sector participation, and inadequate access to international financing instruments constrain progress (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021).

Capacity and Knowledge Gaps: The Southeast of Nigeria faces shortages of trained maritime professionals, marine scientists, and technical experts required to drive innovation and sustainability in the Blue Economy (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2021). Without targeted investment in human capital development, the region risks lagging behind global trends.

Conclusion

The blue economy, conceptualized as a marine-centered economic system, provides opportunities for inclusive growth, resource diversification, and ecological sustainability. The blue economy is unequivocally a transformative approach that integrates commerce, sustainability, and natural resource revitalization. Anchored in **Developmental State Theory**, this study underscores the role of a proactive Nigerian state in driving infrastructural investments such as seaports, dredging projects, and energy development. A developmental state must not only regulate but also strategically intervene in creating enabling conditions for industrial and maritime expansion.

Clearly, the establishment of a seaport in the Southeast of Nigeria remains feasible despite political and structural obstacles. Historical precedents, such as the Oseakwa seaport in Anambra State and Ossemoto in Imo State, demonstrate the region's longstanding maritime potential (Ejimakor, 2023). Proposed sites like Obeaku-Ndoki and Azumiri in Abia State further highlight opportunities for relatively low-dredging seaport development (African Union, 2019). If efficiently harnessed, such projects could lessen structural inequalities in Nigeria's maritime economy, ease congestion at Lagos ports, and transform the Southeast into a hub for freight forwarding as well as industrial growth (Chikezie, 2013).

Similarly, through the lens of **Regional Development Theory**, the neglect of maritime infrastructure in the South East reflects entrenched spatial inequalities that weaken national cohesion and regional competitiveness. The establishment of a functional seaport in the South East would reduce structural imbalances, promote equity among Nigeria's regions, and enhance the zone's integration into national and global markets. Therefore, the blue economy should not be viewed merely as an economic option but as a framework for

correcting developmental asymmetries and strengthening Nigeria's regional balance.

Ultimately, building a sustainable Blue Economy in the Southeast will necessitate visionary leadership, inclusive governance, and public-private partnerships [PPP]. Hence, the federal government, state actors, and regional stakeholders must collaborate to integrate seaport development into broader Blue Economy frameworks, thereby unlocking economic expansion, regional equity, and long-term ecological sustainability (African Union, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

Recommendations

Following our findings, this study recommends:

- **State-led Intervention in Maritime Infrastructure:** In line with Developmental State Theory, the Federal Government should assume an active role in reviving the Oseakwa Seaport and initiating the dredging of the Niger River. Such projects require deliberate state intervention to diversify Nigeria's revenue base beyond petroleum and to reduce overdependence on Lagos ports.
- **Equitable Regional Development through Seaport Projects: Going by Regional Development Theory,** infrastructural investments should address spatial disparities. Building functional seaports in the South East would reduce structural inequalities, enhance economic inclusion, and stimulate industrialization in the region.
- **Stakeholder Collaboration for Regional Advocacy:** The South East governors, in collaboration with the South East Chambers of Commerce, the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) and other stakeholders, should form a strong regional coalition to lobby the Federal Government. This reflects **regional development imperatives**, where collective action is essential to correcting

imbalances in national planning and ensuring federal policies promote balanced growth.

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