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POLICY IMPLEMENTATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN COLLEGES OF EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF SOUTH WESTERN NIGERIA

Muideen Oladeji SALAMI (Ph.D)[1], Habeeb Omoponle ADEWUYI (Ph.D)[2], Lawrence Adedayo ONI[3]

[1] Department of Educational Management, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

[2] Department of Educational Psychology, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

[3] Department of Educational Management, University of Ilesa, Ilesa

Abstract

This qualitative case study examines how sustainable development policies are implemented in colleges of education in South Western Nigeria, with particular attention to curriculum integration, infrastructure development, and community engagement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 purposively selected academic staff across six institutions, supplemented by policy document analysis. The findings reveal partial and fragmented policy implementation characterized by three interrelated deficits: inadequate funding (less than 5% of institutional budgets allocated to sustainability in four of the six colleges), limited staff awareness of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), and weak governance structures lacking dedicated oversight mechanisms. Building on the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, 1988) and the Triple Bottom Line model (Elkington, 1997), the study proposes a context-specific policy implementation framework that integrates curriculum reform, mandatory staff training, governance restructuring, and formalized stakeholder partnerships. The framework is aligned with SDG 4 and Nigeria's National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) and is intended to equip colleges of education to produce teachers capable of addressing Nigeria's complex socio-economic and environmental sustainability challenges.

Keywords: Policy Implementation; Sustainable Development; Colleges of Education; South Western Nigeria; Teacher Education; SDG 4

1. Introduction

The global commitment to sustainable development, formalized through the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, places significant responsibility on higher education institutions to translate global policy frameworks into institutional practice. For colleges of education, this responsibility is doubly consequential: not only must they embed sustainability within their own operations, but they must also prepare future teachers who will carry sustainability principles into classrooms, communities, and public life. SDG 4 — which calls for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all — positions teacher education institutions as critical nodes in the sustainability ecosystem (Shava et al., 2021; United Nations, 2023).

In South Western Nigeria, colleges of education occupy a distinctive and underexplored position within this global discourse. As the primary institutional mechanisms for pre-service teacher training, they are formally mandated by the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) to integrate sustainability principles into curriculum design, institutional governance, and community engagement. Yet a persistent gap exists between this policy mandate and institutional reality. Initial evidence suggests that sustainable development policies in these colleges are inconsistently implemented — a pattern attributable to overlapping constraints including chronic underfunding, inadequate staff capacity, outdated curricular frameworks, and governance deficiencies that frustrate even well-intentioned reform efforts (Enyiazu, 2022; Monday & Mallo, 2021).

This implementation gap is not merely a technical failure; it has substantive educational and developmental consequences. Teacher trainees who graduate without sustainability literacy are ill-equipped to address the environmental, social, and economic challenges confronting Nigerian communities, limiting the contribution of teacher education to national development objectives (Chinda & Sule, 2017; Asagba & Oshebor, 2024). Academic staff, as the primary mediators between institutional policy mandates and classroom practice, are uniquely positioned to illuminate the mechanisms and barriers shaping policy implementation — yet their perspectives remain underrepresented in the literature on sustainability in Nigerian higher education (Zhipeng & Abd Rahman, 2024; Aleru, 2023).

The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative case study approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 12 academic staff and systematic policy document analysis across six colleges of education in

South Western Nigeria. The study pursues four interrelated research questions: (1) How are sustainable development policies integrated into the curriculum? (2) What are the primary barriers to effective policy implementation? (3) How do governance structures influence policy execution? (4) What strategies can enhance stakeholder collaboration? In doing so, it contributes a granular, context-sensitive account of policy implementation dynamics and advances a framework specifically designed to address the structural realities of Nigerian teacher education institutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

This study is theoretically informed by two complementary frameworks that together provide both an analytical lens and a normative model for understanding sustainable development policy implementation in higher education. The first is Sabatier's (1988) Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), which conceptualizes policy outcomes as the product of competing coalitions of stakeholders — including academic staff, administrators, government agencies, and community partners — whose alignment or misalignment determines implementation success or failure. The ACF is particularly well-suited to the Nigerian context, where policy change is frequently shaped by informal power dynamics, resource dependencies, and the competing priorities of heterogeneous stakeholder groups.

The second framework, Elkington's (1997) Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model, provides a normative framework for evaluating sustainability policy by insisting on the simultaneous pursuit of social, economic, and environmental objectives. Applied to colleges of education, the TBL model enables a structured examination of how policy implementation addresses curriculum equity (social), resource efficiency (economic), and environmental stewardship — dimensions that the present study uses to organize its analysis of curriculum integration, infrastructure development, and community engagement.

2.2 International and Continental Perspectives

International scholarship documents a wide spectrum of institutional responses to sustainable development in higher education. In Europe, Zacchia et al. (2022) demonstrate that universities in resource-rich contexts have made substantial progress through interdisciplinary curriculum innovation, sustainability research clusters, and community co-creation programmes — advances underpinned by robust governance frameworks and dedicated sustainability funding. In Asia, Wang and Chen (2021) document how Chinese universities have institutionalized sustainability through national policy mandates and performance-based incentives, creating structural conditions for systematic curriculum integration.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the picture is more variegated. Nhamo and Nhamo (2020) identify meaningful advances in South African universities, where sustainability units and mandatory sustainability modules have been established in several institutions, supported by legislative frameworks and international partnerships. Conversely, in West African contexts, Ayoko et al. (2023) and Igiri et al. (2021) document that resource constraints, weak institutional governance, and limited stakeholder collaboration continue to inhibit progress — findings closely mirrored in the present study's Nigerian context.

2.3 The Nigerian Policy Context

Nigeria's National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) formally mandates the integration of sustainability principles — including environmental awareness, civic responsibility, and community participation — across all levels of the education system. However, the translation of this mandate into institutional practice within colleges of education has been widely documented as uneven and fragmented. Usman (2023) attributes this implementation gap primarily to structural resource deficits: most colleges lack the financial capacity to update curricula, retrain staff, or invest in sustainability-oriented infrastructure. Monday and Mallo (2021) further identify administrative inertia and limited awareness among institutional leaders as compounding factors.

The regional dynamics of South Western Nigeria add further complexity. Suleiman (2015) documents that academic staff in the region are frequently undertrained in sustainability, while institutional priorities — shaped by dependence on state financing and community expectations — tend to favour traditional core subjects over sustainability integration. Atanda and Adeniran (2015) confirm that colleges operate within a deeply resource-constrained environment that necessitates context-specific implementation strategies rather than direct adaptation of global models.

2.4 Governance and Stakeholder Collaboration

The literature consistently identifies governance quality and stakeholder collaboration as the two most powerful structural determinants of sustainable development policy success. Sabatier's (1988) ACF emphasizes that successful policy coalitions require both resource alignment and shared normative beliefs among key actors.

Applied to colleges of education, this means that sustainability implementation depends not only on funding but on the extent to which academic staff, administrators, government officials, and community stakeholders share a commitment to sustainability objectives and have the institutional mechanisms to coordinate their efforts.

Ogunode et al. (2023) document that stakeholder participation in Nigerian higher education is typically shallow and episodic, with community organizations and private sector actors rarely incorporated into formal institutional governance structures. Muhammad (2023) observes similar patterns in comparative Commonwealth contexts, arguing that sustainability governance in resource-constrained settings requires deliberate structural scaffolding — including formal partnership frameworks and accountability mechanisms — rather than relying on informal collaboration. Abiddin et al. (2022) further demonstrate that non-governmental organizations represent an underutilized resource for sustainability capacity-building in West African educational institutions.

2.5 Research Gap

The foregoing review reveals a substantive gap in the literature: while international and pan-African studies provide important frameworks for understanding sustainability in higher education, they are predominantly grounded in resource-rich institutional contexts or engage only superficially with the specific realities of teacher education in Nigeria. Regional studies addressing Nigerian higher education (Babalola & Olawuyi, 2021; Atanda & Adeniran, 2015) document general barriers but do not examine the implementation of sustainable development policies through the granular perspectives of academic staff in colleges of education. This gap is significant because academic staff are the primary agents of policy enactment, and their experiential knowledge of barriers and opportunities is indispensable for designing workable implementation strategies. The present study addresses this gap directly.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) was adopted to generate an in-depth, contextually embedded understanding of how sustainable development policies are implemented — and why they are impeded — in colleges of education in South Western Nigeria. The case study approach is particularly appropriate for this inquiry because it enables the researcher to examine policy implementation within its real-world institutional context, attending to the complex interactions among actors, resources, norms, and structures that quantitative designs cannot readily capture (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interviews with academic staff — the primary implementers of policy at the classroom level — were complemented by analysis of institutional policy documents to provide triangulation and enhance validity.

3.2 Population and Sample

The study population comprises 1,543 academic staff across six colleges of education in South Western Nigeria: Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo; Oyo State College of Education, Lanlate; Federal College of Education, Abeokuta; Sikiru Adetona College of Education, Omu-Ajose; Osun State College of Education, Ila-Orangun; and Federal College of Education (Technical), Akoka. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 12 academic staff (2 per college) with either administrative roles (heads of departments, deans) or a minimum of ten years' professional experience, ensuring that participants possessed substantive knowledge of institutional policy processes. This sampling approach reflects the qualitative priority of depth over breadth: the goal was not statistical representativeness but the identification of information-rich cases (Creswell, 2014).

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection instrument. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted either in-person or via secure virtual platforms, using a pre-tested guide with open-ended questions addressing policy awareness, implementation experiences, governance challenges, and community engagement opportunities. Interview transcripts were supplemented by systematic analysis of publicly available institutional policy documents — including strategic plans, curriculum frameworks, and annual reports — across all six colleges, providing an objective corroborative data source.

3.4 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step protocol: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Codes were developed inductively from transcript data and iteratively refined through constant comparative analysis. Key codes included 'policy awareness,' 'funding barriers,' 'governance accountability,' and 'stakeholder collaboration.' Document analysis was integrated throughout this process to corroborate and contextualize interview findings, enhancing the credibility and transferability of conclusions.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committees of all six participating institutions. All participants provided written informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., Participant A, College 1) to ensure anonymity. Data were stored on encrypted, password-protected servers accessible exclusively to the research team. Participants were fully informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, in accordance with BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines for educational research.

4. Findings and Discussion

Thematic analysis of 12 interviews, triangulated with policy document analysis across six institutions, produced four thematic clusters organized by research question. Direct quotations from participants are used to illuminate and substantiate the thematic patterns identified.

4.1 RQ1: Curriculum Integration of Sustainable Development Policies

Curriculum integration of sustainable development policies was found to be minimal and inconsistent across the six institutions. Document analysis confirmed that only two colleges had incorporated sustainability-focused modules — such as environmental education or civic responsibility units — into their teacher training programmes. In the remaining four colleges, curriculum frameworks contained no explicit references to SDG 4 or sustainability principles, reflecting a persistent subordination of sustainability to traditional subject areas.

This structural gap was vividly articulated by participants. Participant C (College 1) observed that the single available course on environmental awareness is optional, rarely taught, and unsupported by trained staff — conditions that effectively render it invisible within the curriculum. Participant I (College 5) attributed the persistence of outdated curricula to a disconnect between what policy documents mandate and what institutional practice actually delivers, noting that sustainability appears in formal policy but not in teaching. Participant J (College 2) captured the downstream consequence most starkly: students graduate without any functional understanding of SDG 4 because it is not embedded in their training. These accounts converge on a picture of surface-level policy compliance masking substantive non-implementation.

4.2 RQ2: Barriers to Effective Policy Implementation

All 12 participants identified three overlapping and mutually reinforcing barriers to effective sustainability policy implementation: chronic funding insufficiency, limited staff awareness and capacity, and bureaucratic delay. Document analysis provided structural corroboration: sustainability initiatives received less than 5% of annual institutional budgets in four of the six colleges, with no dedicated funding for SDG 4-related activities in any of the institutions reviewed.

Participant A (College 2) described the resource deficit with striking directness: institutional leaders aspire to implement sustainability policies but lack the financial means to develop new programmes or conduct staff training, leaving the institution dependent on outdated facilities and methods. Participant K (College 6) identified a structural contradiction in which government mandates sustainability implementation without providing commensurate resources, effectively delegating the costs of policy execution to already resource-constrained institutions. Participant G (College 5) located the capacity gap at the level of individual professional understanding, noting that many lecturers are not equipped to implement sustainability because no formal professional development pathway has been provided. Participant L (College 3) observed that awareness of SDG 4 was confined to those who had encountered it at external conferences, highlighting the absence of any systematic institutional mechanism for disseminating sustainability knowledge.

4.3 RQ3: Governance Structures and Policy Execution

Weak and inconsistently structured governance emerged as a critical impediment to sustainability policy execution. Only two of the six colleges possessed strategic plans that explicitly incorporated sustainability objectives, and none had established dedicated sustainability oversight committees or monitoring mechanisms. This governance vacuum created conditions in which sustainability policy initiatives — even where initiated — lacked the institutional scaffolding necessary for systematic implementation.

Participant B (College 3) described a pattern of nominal managerial support that does not translate into structured planning or oversight: sustainability is expressed as an aspiration by college leadership without being operationalized through clear plans, timelines, or accountability mechanisms. Participant H (College 6) identified a structural dimension of this problem, observing that top-down decision-making processes exclude academic staff from policy development, generating low ownership and reducing implementation effectiveness. Document analysis supported these accounts: governance frameworks across the colleges consistently prioritized compliance with national accreditation standards over sustainability integration, reflecting the absence of external incentives that would compel sustainability governance reform. Participant M (College 4) confirmed the

absence of monitoring mechanisms, noting that sustainability is mentioned in formal meetings but not subsequently tracked or evaluated.

4.4 RQ4: Stakeholder Collaboration Strategies

Stakeholder collaboration — between colleges, local communities, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations — was identified by all participants as both a potential game-changer for sustainability implementation and a dimension of institutional practice that remains almost entirely underdeveloped. Document analysis revealed that only one college had a documented community-based sustainability initiative — a small-scale recycling programme — while none had formal partnership agreements with external organizations.

Participant D (College 1) identified the absence of a formal engagement framework as the primary obstacle to community partnership: the desire to collaborate on environmental projects exists, but without institutional structures and protocols, such collaboration cannot be systematically initiated or sustained. Participant E (College 4) highlighted the resource mobilization potential of NGO partnerships, noting that external support could fund sustainability workshops that colleges cannot currently afford — yet the mechanisms for initiating such partnerships are unavailable. Participant N (College 5) pointed to the unrealized potential of local community engagement, observing that community members could contribute meaningfully to sustainability projects if a formal approach existed. These accounts consistently reveal a gap between recognized potential and institutional capacity to realize it.

4.5 Thematic Discussion

Theme 1: Curriculum Integration — A Surface Compliance Problem

The minimal curriculum integration documented in this study is consistent with Tilbury's (2011) finding that developing-country institutions frequently adopt sustainability policy at the level of formal documentation without achieving substantive integration in classroom practice. This pattern reflects what Enyiazu (2022) terms 'policy-practice decoupling' — a well-documented phenomenon in the Nigerian education sector wherein national policy mandates and institutional realities diverge significantly. Unlike the integrated sustainability curricula documented in European universities by Zacchia et al. (2022) and Lozano et al. (2013), Nigerian colleges of education lack the resource infrastructure and governance support necessary to translate policy commitments into curriculum transformation. The findings align with Wang and Chen (2021), who demonstrate in the Chinese context that sustainability curriculum integration requires both targeted incentives and institutional capacity development — neither of which is currently systematically provided in the Nigerian colleges studied.

Theme 2: The Structural Basis of Implementation Barriers

The barriers documented in this study — funding deficits, awareness gaps, and bureaucratic delay — are not isolated operational failures but symptoms of a structural implementation problem. The funding data are particularly telling: allocations of less than 5% of institutional budgets to sustainability initiatives represent not merely underfunding but a signal of institutional priority misalignment that reinforces awareness deficits and constrains governance reform simultaneously. These findings extend Okebukola's (2019) critique of resource management in Nigerian higher education by demonstrating that resource scarcity functions as a self-reinforcing cycle: without funding, training is unavailable; without training, awareness is absent; without awareness, sustainability does not register as a governance priority deserving of funding. Breaking this cycle requires externally catalyzed interventions — policy mandates with dedicated funding streams — rather than institution-level incremental change.

Theme 3: Governance Reform as the Pivotal Intervention

The governance findings are perhaps the most theoretically significant of this study. Sabatier's (1988) ACF predicts that policy implementation fails where institutional coalitions are insufficiently aligned — a prediction strongly confirmed by the absence of sustainability committees, the exclusion of academic staff from policy development, and the dominance of compliance-oriented rather than sustainability-oriented governance frameworks. The contrast with the South African case documented by Nhamo and Nhamo (2020), where sustainability governance is institutionalized through dedicated units with formal mandates and accountability mechanisms, underscores the institutional reforms needed in the Nigerian context. Dlamini (2021) further demonstrates that participatory governance models — in which academic staff and community representatives co-design sustainability policies — produce significantly greater implementation fidelity than top-down mandates, suggesting a clear direction for governance reform in the colleges studied.

Theme 4: Community Engagement — From Aspiration to Architecture

The consistent articulation by participants of both the desirability and the absence of community partnerships reflects a structural problem that Abiddin et al. (2022) characterize as an 'institutional-community interface

deficit.' While the ACF framework predicts that multi-stakeholder coalitions are essential for policy success, the institutions studied lack the formal interface mechanisms — MoUs, partnership protocols, joint committees — through which such coalitions can be built and sustained. This stands in marked contrast to evidence from Kenya and South Africa, where structured community-university sustainability partnerships have produced demonstrable outcomes (Nhamo & Nhamo, 2020), and highlights the need for Nigerian colleges to invest in partnership architecture as a precondition for partnership impact.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Summary of Findings

This qualitative case study provides a comprehensive and empirically grounded account of sustainable development policy implementation in colleges of education in South Western Nigeria. The core finding is one of systematic under-implementation: sustainability policies exist at the level of national mandate and, in some cases, institutional documentation, but their translation into curriculum practice, governance structures, and community partnerships remains profoundly incomplete. Three interrelated structural deficits drive this pattern: resource inadequacy (less than 5% budget allocation in four colleges), capacity deficits (widespread absence of professional development opportunities in sustainability), and governance gaps (no dedicated sustainability committees or monitoring mechanisms in any of the six institutions). These deficits are mutually reinforcing, collectively preventing the institutions from fulfilling their potential as agents of sustainability in Nigerian teacher education.

The academic staff perspectives gathered through semi-structured interviews provide a richly textured account of how these structural conditions are experienced and navigated at the frontline of policy implementation. The persistent tension between formal policy mandates and institutional capacity — captured vividly in participants' references to policies that exist on paper but not in practice — points to the need for a qualitatively different approach to sustainability policy implementation: one grounded in institutional reality, supported by adequate resources, and anchored in participatory governance.

5.2 Context-Specific Policy Implementation Framework

Drawing on the ACF and TBL frameworks and the empirical findings of this study, a context-specific Policy Implementation Framework for Sustainable Development in Nigerian Colleges of Education (PIF-SD) is proposed. The framework comprises five mutually reinforcing components:

Component 1 — Mandatory Curriculum Integration: Compulsory sustainability modules aligned with SDG 4 to be embedded in all teacher preparation programmes, supported by low-cost open-access teaching materials and peer-developed case studies of local sustainability practice.

Component 2 — Structured Staff Capacity Development: Mandatory biannual sustainability training workshops co-facilitated by national and international experts, with sustainability literacy integrated into staff professional development portfolios and promotion criteria.

Component 3 — Governance Restructuring: Establishment of Sustainability Implementation Committees at each college with explicit mandates, dedicated budget allocations, academic staff representation, and reporting lines to institutional leadership. Decision-making processes to be streamlined to reduce bureaucratic delay.

Component 4 — Formalized Community and NGO Partnerships: Development of Memoranda of Understanding with local communities, state and federal government agencies, and NGOs, creating structured frameworks for collaborative sustainability projects, resource mobilization, and shared accountability.

Component 5 — Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms: Systematic sustainability monitoring through annual institutional sustainability reports, aligned with national accreditation requirements, to create incentives for implementation fidelity and enable evidence-based policy iteration.

5.3 Recommendations

1. The Federal Government of Nigeria and state governments should establish dedicated sustainability education funding lines within annual higher education budgets, with ring-fenced allocations for curriculum development, staff training, and sustainability infrastructure in colleges of education.

2. The National Commission for Colleges of Education should revise accreditation criteria to include explicit sustainability education benchmarks, making the integration of SDG 4 objectives a condition for institutional accreditation.

3. College leadership teams should establish Sustainability Implementation Committees with genuine institutional authority, staff representation, and dedicated financial resources, replacing ad-hoc sustainability mentions in meetings with systematic oversight.

4. Colleges should proactively develop formal partnership frameworks with local communities, NGOs, and private sector organizations, beginning with pilot MoUs that define shared objectives, resource contributions, and accountability expectations.

5. A national sustainability education exchange network for colleges of education should be established to facilitate peer learning, the dissemination of best practices, and the coordinated scaling of successful sustainability innovations across institutions.

5.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. Its scope is confined to six colleges of education in South Western Nigeria, limiting the generalizability of findings to other regions or educational levels. The purposively selected sample of 12 academic staff may not fully represent the diversity of perspectives within the broader population of 1,543 staff across the six institutions. Reliance on interview data introduces the possibility of social desirability effects, mitigated but not eliminated by the use of document analysis for triangulation. The study's exclusive focus on academic staff perspectives leaves underexplored the voices of students, community members, and policymakers.

Future research should extend this inquiry through multi-regional comparative studies across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones to assess whether the implementation barriers documented here are nationally generalized or regionally distinctive. Quantitative research designs could complement the present qualitative account by measuring the impact of sustainability policy interventions on educational outcomes, including teacher preparedness and student sustainability awareness. Longitudinal studies tracking the implementation of the proposed PIF-SD framework across multiple years would provide valuable evidence of its effectiveness. Finally, participatory action research designs involving academic staff, students, and community members as co-investigators could generate both richer empirical insights and greater stakeholder ownership of sustainability reform processes.

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