

Political, Economic, and Institutional Determinants of Public Project Abandonment: Evidence from the Niger Delta Development Commission in Ondo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Public project abandonment remains one of the most persistent obstacles to sustainable development in oil-producing regions of Nigeria, yet much of the existing literature treats successive government transition as an undifferentiated cause of discontinuity without decomposing the specific political, economic, and institutional mechanisms through which abandonment occurs. This study addressed that gap by examining the joint and relative contribution of political, economic, and institutional factors to the discontinuity of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) projects across administrations in Ondo State, Nigeria. A descriptive correlational survey design was adopted, and data were obtained from 360 respondents drawn from NDDC beneficiary communities through a multistage sampling procedure. A three-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was employed to test the combined and incremental predictive power of the three factor domains. The results showed that political factors accounted for 39 percent of the variance in project discontinuity, economic factors added a further 19 percent, and institutional factors contributed an additional 8 percent, with the full model explaining 64 percent of the variance, $F(15, 344) = 43.60$, $p < .05$. Political favoritism and campaign manifesto fulfilment emerged as the strongest individual predictors. The findings are interpreted through institutional theory and public choice theory, and the paper concludes with policy recommendations for insulating public projects from the incentives that drive politically motivated discontinuation.

Keywords: Project abandonment, institutional theory, public choice theory, rent-seeking, Niger Delta Development Commission, Nigeria.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public infrastructure and socio-economic intervention projects are conceived as instruments through which government translates policy commitments into tangible improvements in citizens' living conditions. In Nigeria, this logic underpinned the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), a federal agency created to promote sustained infrastructural and socio-economic development in the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta. Despite considerable statutory allocations and donor support, the Commission's record has been marked by a persistent pattern of stalled, duplicated, or wholly abandoned projects, a pattern that a federal forensic audit attributed in part to weak internal controls and inconsistent project oversight (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021). Within Ondo State, one of the

Commission's operational areas, residents of beneficiary communities have repeatedly reported roads, water schemes, and public buildings that were commenced under one administration and left unfinished under the next (Aroge, 2023).

The dominant explanation offered for this pattern in both public discourse and much of the scholarly literature is that "successive government" transition disrupts project continuity. This explanation, while intuitive, is analytically incomplete. Treating government transition as a single undifferentiated cause obscures the distinct political, economic, and institutional mechanisms through which leadership change actually produces abandonment. Political favoritism in the award of contracts, the fulfilment or repudiation of campaign manifestos, sudden economic

shocks such as inflation or delayed fund disbursement, and institutional weaknesses such as poor project documentation or inadequate feasibility studies may each operate independently or jointly to predict discontinuity, yet few empirical studies have modelled their relative and combined contributions within a single analytical framework. Williams (2017) similarly cautions that unfinished development projects in weak-institution settings may reflect corruption, clientelism, or collective political choice operating simultaneously rather than a single dominant cause, which reinforces the need for a multidimensional empirical test rather than a descriptive attribution to “government change.”

This paper addressed this gap by testing, through a three-step hierarchical multiple regression, whether political, economic, and institutional factors jointly and independently predict the discontinuity of NDDC projects across successive government administrations in Ondo State. The null hypothesis guiding the analysis was that factors contributing to the discontinuity of NDDC projects across different government administrations do not exist in Ondo State. Beyond its empirical contribution, the study is theoretically situated at the intersection of institutional theory and public choice theory, allowing the discussion to move beyond description toward an explanation of why certain factors, rather than others, exert the strongest influence on abandonment. The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant conceptual, theoretical, and empirical literature, describes the methodology, reports the regression findings, and discusses their implications for policy and future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review: Public Project Abandonment

Project abandonment refers to the permanent or prolonged cessation of works on a public project before its intended completion, resulting in a physically incomplete structure, an unrealized development outcome, or both (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003). The concept extends beyond simple delay, which implies an eventual, if postponed, completion, to a condition in which the project is effectively discontinued, its resources diverted, and its intended beneficiaries left without the anticipated service. Damoah, Mouzoghi, and Kumi (2018) argue that government construction project abandonment carries costs that extend well beyond the sunk financial investment, including the erosion of public trust, the deterioration of already-constructed portions of a project, and the loss of opportunity for the communities the project was meant to serve. In a related study, Damoah, Tingbani, Kumi, Akwei, and Amoako (2019) identify weak project appraisal, inadequate funding continuity, and shifting political priorities as recurring proximate causes of abandonment in publicly funded construction.

Within the Nigerian context specifically, abandonment has been documented as a chronic feature of public sector project delivery rather than an occasional failure. Ingwe, Mboto, and Ebong (2012) trace a substantial share of unspent and misapplied public capital budgets to abandoned projects, arguing that recovery of these funds is hampered by weak institutional accountability mechanisms. Adebayo and Igbokwe (2022) extend this argument by linking public project failure directly to accountability deficits within implementing agencies, a diagnosis consistent with the NDDC's own documented governance weaknesses. Taken together, this literature supports treating abandonment not as a unitary event but as an outcome produced by the interaction of political, economic, and institutional conditions, which is precisely the multidimensional structure this study sought to test empirically.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Institutional Theory

Institutional theory holds that organizational and administrative behaviour is shaped less by rational technical calculation than by the formal rules, informal norms, and cognitive frameworks within which actors operate (North, 1990; Scott, 2014). The theory's intellectual roots lie in Weber's (1947) account of bureaucratic structures as sources of enduring, predictable rules of conduct, a foundation extended by Selznick (1957), who observed that organizations acquire a social character and normative expectations that outlast the individuals who staff them. March and Olsen (1989) build on this tradition to argue that institutions generate path dependence, such that established routines tend to reproduce themselves and resist abrupt disruption unless the institutional environment is itself weak or politicized.

Applied to the present study, institutional theory predicts that where an implementing agency such as the NDDC possesses weak internal safeguards, such as inconsistent project documentation, inadequate feasibility appraisal, or unstable governing structures, ongoing projects lose the institutional protection that would otherwise allow them to survive a change in political leadership. Grindle's (2017) critique of governance reform agendas is instructive here, as it cautions that formal institutional prescriptions frequently fail in practice because they are not matched by the administrative capacity or political insulation needed to sustain them. This reasoning informed the inclusion of institutional lapses, poor project documentation, weak legal framework, poor institutional mechanism, and poor feasibility study as the institutional predictors tested in the third step of the regression model reported below.

2.2.2 Public Choice and Rent-Seeking Theory

Where institutional theory explains why weak organizational structures fail to protect projects from

disruption, public choice theory explains why political actors have an incentive to disrupt them in the first place. Buchanan and Tullock (1962) argued that political actors, like market actors, pursue outcomes that serve their own advantage or that of their support networks rather than an undifferentiated public interest. Krueger (1974) extended this reasoning through the concept of rent-seeking, describing the pursuit of benefits from public resources through political influence rather than productive contribution. Mueller (2003) synthesizes this tradition to show how electoral incentives, patronage, and the desire for political credit shape which public programmes are funded, continued, or quietly discontinued.

This theoretical lens is directly applicable to the behaviour observed around NDDC projects in Ondo State, where incoming administrations have an incentive to distance themselves from the visible achievements of their predecessors and to redirect resources toward projects that can be credited to the new leadership. Williams (2017) frames this dynamic as a central explanation for unfinished development projects in weak-institution settings, arguing that abandonment can reflect a rational, if socially costly, political choice rather than mere administrative failure. Public choice theory therefore generated the expectation, tested in this study, that political favoritism and the fulfilment (or repudiation) of campaign manifestos would emerge as significant, and possibly the strongest, predictors of project discontinuity, since both variables capture the direct translation of political self-interest into project-level outcomes.

2.3 Empirical Review and Research Gap

Empirical studies on the NDDC's operations in the Niger Delta have consistently documented governance weaknesses. Alabi and Adah (2021) conducted a critical appraisal of corruption and public policy failure within the Commission, concluding that mismanagement of funds under successive administrations directly undermines project completion. Ekanem and Olabisi (2022) examined institutional inertia in the Niger Delta and found that inherited administrative weaknesses, rather than any single political event, sustain a cycle of abandonment across the region. Focusing specifically on Ondo State, Aroge (2023) reported that public project failure has measurable adverse effects on infrastructural development, though this study did not decompose the relative contribution of political, economic, and institutional causes. At the national level, the federal forensic audit of the NDDC (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021) identified irregular procurement, weak monitoring, and politically influenced contract awards as recurring findings across multiple project files.

While this body of work establishes that governance weaknesses are pervasive within the NDDC,

it stops short of testing, within a single statistical model, how much of the variance in project discontinuity is attributable to political factors as distinct from economic and institutional factors, and which specific variables within each domain carry the greatest predictive weight. This represents a meaningful gap, because policy responses aimed at strengthening, for example, institutional documentation practices are unlikely to succeed if the dominant driver of abandonment is instead political favoritism in contractor selection. The present study addressed this gap directly, on the basis of the null hypothesis that political, economic, and institutional factors do not significantly and jointly predict the discontinuity of NDDC projects across successive government administrations in Ondo State.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive and correlational survey research design, which was appropriate for capturing respondents' perceptions of NDDC project implementation while also permitting statistical estimation of the relationships among the study's key variables. The population comprised residents and stakeholders of NDDC beneficiary communities across the three senatorial districts of Ondo State, drawn from a combined local government population of 701,930 based on the 2006 national census. Applying Yamane's (1967) formula for sample size determination at a 5 percent margin of error yielded a minimum sample of approximately 399 respondents, distributed in equal proportion across Akure South, Irele, and Akoko North-West local government areas. Following data cleaning, 360 valid responses were retained for the hierarchical regression analysis reported below.

A multistage sampling procedure combined stratified random sampling, used to ensure fair representation of NDDC officials, local government staff, contractors, community leaders, and project beneficiaries, with cluster sampling of communities hosting ongoing or completed NDDC projects within each senatorial district. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising a demographic section and a set of five-point Likert-scale items measuring perceived political, economic, and institutional factors alongside project discontinuity outcomes. Content validity was established through expert review by specialists in public administration and research methodology, and internal consistency was confirmed through a pilot test of thirty respondents, yielding Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .78 to .84 across subscales and an overall coefficient of .83, exceeding the conventional threshold of .70 for social science instruments.

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25. Descriptive statistics summarized respondent

characteristics, while a three-step hierarchical multiple regression was used to test the study's central hypothesis. Political variables (government transition, political interest, political corruption, campaign manifesto, and political favoritism) were entered in the first step, economic variables (economic downturn, budgetary change, inflation, poor financial planning, and delayed funds disbursement) were added in the second step, and institutional variables (institutional lapses, poor project documentation, weak legal framework, poor institutional mechanism, and poor feasibility study) were entered in the third step, with project discontinuity as the dependent variable throughout. This sequential entry allowed the incremental variance explained by each factor domain to

be isolated. Ethical clearance procedures included informed consent, assured confidentiality, and voluntary participation for all respondents.

4. RESULTS

Descriptive analysis of the 360 valid responses showed broad agreement among beneficiary communities that political favoritism in the selection of project contractors was a recurring concern, a pattern consistent with the regression findings reported below. The three-step hierarchical multiple regression produced a coherent and statistically significant model at each stage.

Table 1: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting NDDC Project Discontinuity in Ondo State (N = 360)

Step	Predictor	B	β	t	p	R ²	ΔR^2	F / ΔF
1: Political Factors	Government transition	1.48	.18	3.91	< .05	.39	.39	F(5,354) = 45.18*
	Political interest	.95	.12	2.45	< .05			
	Campaign manifesto	1.83	.25	5.73	< .05			
	Political favouritism	2.16	.34	7.38	< .05			
	Political corruption	.48	.08	1.90	> .05			
2: Economic Factors Added	Economic downturn	1.09	.15	3.78	< .05	.58	.19	$\Delta F(5,349) = 31.01^{**}$
	Budgetary change	1.22	.15	3.74	< .01			
	Inflation	1.18	.17	4.16	< .05			
	Poor financial planning	1.15	.15	3.60	< .05			
	Delayed funds disbursement	1.20	.15	3.76	< .05			
3: Institutional Factors Added	Institutional lapses	1.54	.18	4.89	< .05	.66	.08	$\Delta F(5,344) = 15.57^*$
	Poor project documentation	.80	.10	2.64	< .05			
	Poor feasibility study	1.13	.16	4.03	< .05			
	Weak legal framework	.48	.07	1.71	> .05			
	Poor institutional mechanism	.41	.06	1.46	> .05			
Full Model	Political, economic and institutional factors					.66		F(15,344) = 43.60*

Note. B= unstandardised regression coefficient. β = standardised regression coefficient. R²= proportion of variance explained. ΔR^2 = additional variance explained following the inclusion of a new block of predictors. *p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 1 presents the hierarchical multiple regression results on the political, economic, and institutional factors associated with NDDC project discontinuity in Ondo State. In the first step, the political variables jointly explained 39 percent of the variation in project discontinuity, with the model reaching statistical significance, F(5, 354) = 45.18, p < .05. Among the political variables, political favouritism recorded the strongest effect (β = .34), followed by campaign manifesto (β = .25), government transition (β = .18), and political interest (β = .12). These variables were statistically significant predictors of project discontinuity. Political corruption, however, was not statistically significant (β = .08, p > .05), indicating that its independent contribution was relatively weak when compared with the other political variables.

The introduction of economic factors in the second step improved the explanatory strength of the model. Economic downturn, budgetary change, inflation, poor financial planning, and delayed funds disbursement all made statistically significant

contributions to project discontinuity. Inflation recorded the highest standardised coefficient among the economic variables (β = .17), while the remaining economic predictors had similar effects of approximately β = .15. This indicates that financial instability, changes in budgetary conditions, and difficulties in the release and management of funds contribute meaningfully to the discontinuity of NDDC projects.

At the third stage, institutional factors made an additional contribution to the model. Institutional lapses (β = .18), poor feasibility study (β = .16), and poor project documentation (β = .10) significantly predicted project discontinuity. In contrast, weak legal framework (β = .07) and poor institutional mechanism (β = .06) were not statistically significant. Overall, the results show that project discontinuity is associated with a combination of political, economic, and institutional conditions. Political favouritism emerged as the strongest individual predictor among the variables reported in the analysis, suggesting that politically influenced decisions, particularly those relating to project and contractor

selection, have a substantial relationship with the discontinuation of NDDC projects in Ondo State.

Table 2: Summary of the Hierarchical Regression Models

Model	Variables Entered	R ²	Variance Explained (%)	ΔR ²	Additional Variance (%)	Model Test
Model 1	Political factors	.39	39%	.39	39%	F(5,354) = 45.18, p < .05
Model 2	Political + economic factors	.58	58%	.19	19%	ΔF(5,349) = 31.01, p < .01
Model 3	Political + economic + institutional factors	.66	66%	.08	8%	ΔF(5,344) = 15.57, p < .05
Full Model	All 15 predictors	.66	66%			F(15,344) = 43.60, p < .05

The statistical pattern is especially clear in this format. Political factors initially explained 39% of the variation in project discontinuity. Economic factors contributed a further 19%, while institutional factors added approximately 8%. Together, the three sets of factors explained about 66% of the variance in NDDC project discontinuity.

Among the political variables, political favouritism had the largest standardised coefficient ($\beta = .34$), followed by campaign manifesto ($\beta = .25$). Among the institutional variables, institutional lapses ($\beta = .18$) and poor feasibility study ($\beta = .16$) were significant. Political corruption, weak legal framework, and poor institutional mechanism were not statistically significant at the reported level.

Table 2 summarises the contribution of the three groups of explanatory variables to NDDC project discontinuity. The first model, which contained only political factors, explained 39 percent of the variance in project discontinuity. This shows that political conditions alone accounted for a considerable proportion of the differences observed in the continuity of NDDC projects. When economic factors were introduced in the second model, the proportion of variance explained increased from 39 percent to 58 percent. The additional 19 percent contribution indicates that economic conditions substantially improved the explanatory capacity of the model beyond the influence of political factors alone.

The inclusion of institutional factors in the third model further increased the explained variance by approximately 8 percentage points, bringing the total variance explained by the full model to about 66 percent. The increase associated with each successive block of variables was statistically significant, indicating that political, economic, and institutional factors each contributed to explaining project discontinuity. The full model was also statistically significant, $F(15, 344) = 43.60, p < .05$. This means that the combined effect of the three categories of factors provides a substantial explanation for the discontinuity of NDDC projects in Ondo State.

The findings therefore indicate that project discontinuity cannot be explained adequately by a single category of factors. Political influences provide the largest initial contribution, while economic and institutional conditions add further explanatory value. On the basis of the overall statistical significance of the model, the null hypothesis that political, economic, and institutional factors do not significantly predict NDDC project discontinuity in Ondo State is rejected.

5. DISCUSSION

The finding that political favoritism and campaign manifesto fulfilment were the strongest individual predictors of project discontinuity lends direct empirical support to public choice and rent-seeking accounts of public project behaviour. Consistent with Krueger's (1974) original formulation of rent-seeking and with Mueller's (2003) broader synthesis, the results suggest that decisions over which NDDC projects survive a change of administration are shaped less by the technical merit or developmental value of the project than by the political returns it offers incoming leadership. This interpretation aligns closely with Williams's (2017) argument that unfinished development projects in weak-institution contexts often reflect a rational political choice rather than an administrative accident, and it echoes Alabi and Adah's (2021) finding that mismanagement under successive NDDC administrations is bound up with the political incentives of officeholders rather than with technical capacity alone.

The significance of institutional lapses and poor feasibility study, by contrast, supports the institutional theory expectation that weak organizational safeguards leave projects exposed to disruption when political leadership changes (North, 1990; Scott, 2014). Because feasibility appraisal and documentation are precisely the routines that, per March and Olsen (1989), would otherwise generate path-dependent continuity, their weakness in the NDDC context helps explain why incoming administrations face few institutional constraints when redirecting or abandoning inherited projects. This finding is broadly consistent with Ekanem and Olabisi's (2022) characterization of institutional

inertia in the Niger Delta as a structural, rather than purely political, contributor to discontinuity.

One result that departs from the dominant narrative in Nigerian public discourse deserves particular caution in interpretation: political corruption, considered on its own alongside the other political variables, did not reach statistical significance once favoritism, manifesto fulfilment, and the remaining predictors were accounted for. This should not be read as evidence that corruption is absent from NDDC operations, a conclusion the federal forensic audit would directly contradict (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021); rather, it suggests that within this sample, corruption's effect on discontinuity may operate indirectly through, or may be statistically absorbed by, the closely related variable of political favoritism in contractor selection. This distinction between corruption as a general phenomenon and favoritism as a specific behavioural mechanism would benefit from further qualitative investigation, and any claim generalizing this null finding beyond the sampled communities in Ondo State should be treated with appropriate caution pending replication.

6. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to move beyond the generic attribution of NDDC project abandonment to “successive government” transition by testing, through hierarchical regression, the distinct and combined contributions of political, economic, and institutional factors. The results showed that all three domains contribute significantly to discontinuity, jointly explaining 64 percent of the variance, with political favoritism and campaign manifesto fulfilment carrying the greatest individual weight. Theoretically, the findings support a combined institutional and public choice explanation of project abandonment, in which weak organizational safeguards create the opportunity for discontinuity while political incentives supply the motive.

The practical implications follow directly from this dual explanation. Policy interventions that target only institutional weaknesses, such as improved documentation systems, are unlikely to succeed on their own if political favoritism in contractor selection remains unaddressed, since the two operate through different mechanisms identified in this study's regression model. Legally binding project continuity frameworks, transparent and depoliticized contractor selection procedures, and independent monitoring mechanisms insulated from changes in political leadership would together address both the institutional and political drivers identified here. Strengthening feasibility appraisal and project documentation practices, in particular, would raise the institutional cost of abandoning an inherited project, consistent with the

path-dependence logic of institutional theory (March & Olsen, 1989).

This study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional design captures respondents' perceptions at a single point in time and cannot establish the temporal sequence between political leadership change and project discontinuity with certainty. The sample was also drawn exclusively from Ondo State, and while the theoretical mechanisms identified are plausible in other NDDC operational states, the specific magnitude of the coefficients reported here should not be generalized beyond the sampled population without further comparative research. Future studies would benefit from replicating this hierarchical model across additional Niger Delta states and from complementing the quantitative findings with qualitative interviews that can probe the relationship between political favoritism and corruption more directly than a single cross-sectional survey allows.

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