

## ETHNIC IDENTITY AND SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN DELTA STATE

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### Abstract

*Socioeconomic development in a multi-ethnic Federal System of Government such as Nigeria's is driven by a form of political ethnocentrism—where ethnic groups promote their own socio-economic development at the expense of national prosperity. This study investigates the dynamics between ethnic identity, politicking, and socioeconomic development in Delta State, Nigeria. Employing a cross-sectional research design with a sample size of 373 respondents, the study utilized multistage sampling and questionnaire-based data collection. Analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation ( $r=0.011$ ,  $p=0.011$ ) between ethnic politicking and socioeconomic development, indicating that as ethnic politicking levels rise, there is a slight tendency for socioeconomic development to increase as well. Additionally, a significant difference was found between ethnic identity and poverty in Delta State ( $F=0.925$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), highlighting the distinctness of ethnic identity from poverty levels. The discussion delves into the implications of these findings, aligning with existing literature that emphasizes the impact of ethnic identity on political behavior, resource allocation, and development outcomes. Recommendations emphasize leveraging ethnic identity for inclusive development discourse and poverty alleviation initiatives, advocating for credible leadership and targeted policies to address regional disparities. This study contributes to understanding the role of ethnic identity in shaping development trajectories, urging policymakers to harness ethnic diversity as a catalyst for socioeconomic progress and equitable resource distribution.*

**Keywords:** Delta State, Ethnic Identity, Ethnic Politicking, Poverty, Socioeconomic Development.

### Introduction

To fully understand the concept of ethnic identity, there is need to first clarify the concept of the ethnic group. Cohen (cited in Salawu & Hassan, 2011) sees ethnic group as an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other ethnic groups within the larger society because they share kingship, religious and linguistics ties. Yinger (cited in Lee et al., 2002), on the other hand defines the ethnic group as a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves and/or others, to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common origin and culture and who in addition participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients. In a shift from the above, Hale (2004) sees ethnic group as a set of people who perceive that they

have things (social, political and economy) in common and that their similarities are captured by a label; the ethnic group name, as in Zulu and Xhosa in South Africa, Igbos, Ishekiri, and Ijaws in Nigeria.

These definitions presuppose one major concept which is differentiation either by linguistic differences, environmental enclaves, social, cultural, economic and political patterns. An ethnic group is usually separated from others through the combination of or separately by any of this identifiable feature. This is why Elebeke (2010) defined identity as a process located in the core of the individual and also the core of his communal culture. Your identity is who you are. Who you are is defined by your language, habitat or environment, socio-cultural life pattern, political and economic features. However, due to perceived economic cum political marginalization, other ethnic identities have metamorphosed within the Nigerian state mostly adopting their ethnic identity through linguistic differentials. Thus, today Nigeria is said to comprise of more than 500 ethnic identities (Osuntokun, 2017).

Ethnic identity is therefore a conscious awareness within an individual or group of distinctive features which separates them from other groups within a pluralistic society. It is mostly manifested in agitations for the restructuring of existing status -quo perceived to be unjust mostly in areas such as resource control, equity and political inclusiveness. The next section of the study examines the concept of socio-economic development

In order to understand this concept, let us begin by defining development. Generally, development is defined as a state in which things are improving. But it is defined in different ways in various contexts. Gboyega (2003) opine that development as an idea embodies all attempts to improve the conditions of human existence in all ramifications. It implies improvement in material wellbeing of all citizens, not the most powerful and rich alone, in a sustainable way such that today's consumption does not imperil the future. In the socio-economic context, development means the improvement of people's lifestyles through improved education, incomes, skills development and employment. It is the process of economic and social transformation based on cultural and environmental factors.

Socioeconomic development is the process of social and economic development in a society and it is measured with indicators, such as gross domestic product (GDP), life expectancy, literacy and levels of employment (Otoghagua, 2007). For better understanding of socioeconomic development, we may understand the meaning of social and economic development separately. Social development is a process which results in the transformation of social institutions in a manner which improves the capacity of the society to fulfill its aspirations (Domański, 2004). It implies a qualitative change in the way the society shapes itself and carries out its activities, such as through more progressive attitudes and behavior by the population, the adoption of more effective processes or more advanced technology (Coker, 2008). The pace of socioeconomic development in Nigeria is uneven across ethnic lines and this has been worrisome.

In Nigeria, the heightened levels of ethnic consciousness arguably cements the place of ethnic as a major currency for social competition and group relations. The evident fragmentation of the Nigerian state, has in amongst others, informed widespread unhealthy competition and rivalry for access to scarce economic resources and political power along ethnic fault lines. More than ever, Nigerians are inclined to identify with their ethnic decent as opposed to their national identity as it is not uncommon to hear phrases like ‘I’m Hausa, he is Yoruba and so on (Yakubu, 2019). Mazrui (1982) shares a similar view claiming contemporary African nationalism derived and prospered on racial solidarity and shared blackness. Further arguing that viability of modern nations continues to be deterred by acute ethnic cleavages, often separating the Bantu from the Nilotes. Relatedly, Suberu (2014) argued that the threatened foundations of Nigeria's multiethnic structure seem to be all too ostensible from the ethnic, regional, religious and political turbulence that has assailed the country (and claimed more than ten thousand lives) since returning to civil rule in May 1999.

Consequently, Eriksen (2011) is of the view that ethnic ideologies are at loggerhead with prevailing nationalist dogmas, considering the latter upholds cultural correspondence and all-encompassing integration of inhabitants of a nation-state regardless of their ethnic descent. For Ake (1993) cited in Umeh (2020) in the evident absence of class consciousness, elites who come from numerically large ethnic origins, could not help but exploit their substantial ethnic base politically. Group several times have pursuit ethnic interest not with the intent to foster development at the regional or ethnic levels per se but with individual group interest that does not profit the larger ethnic identity label (Salihu & Yahaya, 2020).

In congruence of the situation, most ethnic groups have sort a unique form of politicking as a form of departure from national prosperity ideologies (where every State pull resources together in furtherance of a national objective) to a more ethnocentric perspective tagged “Ethnic politicking”. Ethnic politicking in this context refers to the strategic use of ethnic identity by elites and politicians to pursue their interests within the political arena, both at the state and federal levels (Umeh, 2020). It is the portrayal as a phenomenon where actors (political or non-political) use ethnic affiliations to drive socioeconomic progress within the state while also advocating for a fair share of national resources (Eriksen, 2011). Based on the foregoing therefore, the current study explores how this idea of ethnic identity as well as ethnic politicking contributes to the current state of socio-economic development in Delta State.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Elites and politicians within the ethnic front have been exploiting ethnic identity label to pursue their interest within the realms of politics at the state and federal level. This most times is done with the clamour for socioeconomic development for members of the ethnic group whose collective identity forms social cleavage to harness the politics interest of its members. In the

words of Ekpe (2019), socioeconomic development from the ethnic group perspective is seen as not holistically achieved in a better way when leadership at the state and federal level is not from the social enclave that represents the ethnic identity. Ajube (2021) argued that this ordinarily ought not to be the case if national interest was pursued for the benefit of all, but the realities on ground have proven to be that primordial interest of group benefit has come to override socioeconomic development even in the presence of introduced federal principle.

Hence, as evidence of national disintegration glooms and in light of declining legitimacy concerning the concept of national identity, there has been considerable support and inclination towards ethnic integration and prosperity (wherefore the numerous ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria strategically breakout from a national ideology pursuit to promoting agency, and self-preservation), which existing literature completely overlooks. There is also recognition that despite discussions on ethnic identity and development being prevalent in articles and literature, none have taken substantial steps to ascertain the contributions or transformations brought about by such ideas. Moreover, there is no acknowledgment of the exponential socioeconomic development in Delta State, particularly regarding how efforts by Delta State citizens at local, state, and national levels strategically propel the socio-political advancements aimed at Delta State's socioeconomic well-being against equitable allocation of national resources.

Therefore, building on Otoghagua's (2007) framework, the issue arises from the scant recognition in the literature of any correlation between ethnic identity and key developmental markers observed in Delta State in recent years. Again, drawing from Elebeke (2010) and Osuntokun (2017) frameworks, the following positive indicators are posited to demonstrate the overlooked symbiotic relationship between ethnic identity and socio-economic development. This underscores a gap in: adequate evidence, as compared to what is acknowledged in the literature, of political efforts by Delta State leaders at the national level to advocate for and sponsor bills aimed at directing national resources to Delta State for enhancing local economic growth (Rivera, Leon, Cornejo & Florez, 2023). This growth is quantified by observable advancements in the State's contributions to GDP (Gross Domestic Product), GNP (Gross National Product), and GNI (Gross National Income) (Paul & Adoji, 2022); and evidence of ethnic cohesion in both local and national politics, evidenced by a favorable decrease in local poverty rates and a measurable rise in the quality of life for disadvantaged individuals' resident in Delta State against the rest of Nigeria (Li & Zhang, 2020). Key indicators of these efforts are noticeable in improved access to basic necessities, enhanced educational standards across all levels, and increased job opportunities (Rivera, Leon, Cornejo & Florez, 2023).

### **Objectives of the study**

Based on the foregoing, the general objective of the study is to examine the nexus between ethnic identity and socioeconomic development in Delta State. The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the relationship between ethnic politicking and socioeconomic development in Delta State
2. ascertain the effect of ethnic identity in fostering poverty in Delta State.

### **Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant relationship between ethnic politicking and socioeconomic development in Delta State
2. There is no significant difference between ethnic identity and poverty in Delta State.

### **Theoretical Framework and Related Studies**

Symbolic interaction theory is one of the theories in sociology. It is a theory that believes that the meaning of objects, behaviour and events come from the interpretation given by the people and interpretation differs from people to people (Asemah, 2016). Symbolic interaction theory is a social psychological theory that was developed from the work of Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead in the early 20th century. Although, Mead in 1934 contributed greatly to the symbolic interactionism, the work was not published until after his demise in 1969. Herbert Blumer, a student under Mead published it after the death of Mead. Symbolic interaction theory postulates that people are urged to act based on the meanings they attribute to people, events and things. The focus of this theory is on the ways in which people formulate meanings and structures in a society through Interaction. In other words, meanings are created when people interact. Without interaction or communication, meanings cannot actually be gotten, as the world is made up of social objects that are named and have socially determined meanings. When people relate, interact, communicate overtime, they come to a shared meaning for certain terms and actions and thus, come to understand events in particular ways (Asemah, 2016). Actions of people are based on symbolic meanings they find within any given situation. The action of interactions with one another is to create shared meaning (Changing Mind, 2015).

Accordingly, the theory argues that within ethnic groups, individuals interpret their ethnic identity as a symbol that signifies belonging, shared history, and common interests (Verkuyten, 2018). This symbolic meaning of ethnic identity influences how individuals within the group engage in politicking, as they seek to protect and promote the perceived interests of their ethnic community. For example, politicians from a particular ethnic group may rally support from their constituents by framing their political agenda as crucial for advancing the socio-economic well-being of the group (Daneri, Krasny & Stedman, 2021). Besides, the symbolic interaction theory, when applied in context suggests that actors, (political and non-political) justify socio-economic interest based on its' symbolic meaning of an ethnic prosperity, thus taking on an ethnocentric approach to issues of development to justify policies sponsored, and actions taken to guarantee self-preservation. For instance, policies that allocate resources or prioritize development projects based on ethnic

considerations reflect the symbolic importance of ethnic identity in shaping resource distribution and development outcomes (Verkuyten, 2018).

One overarching effect of operationalizing the theory in this study is the nuanced understanding it provides regarding the interplay between ethnic identity, political behavior, and socio-economic development. By utilizing quantitative methods rooted in symbolic interactionism, researchers gain a deeper insight into how symbolic meanings shape individuals' perceptions, actions, and outcomes within ethnic communities, especially Delta State. The theory is also promising for its ability to unveil patterns and correlations between symbolic identity strength and various socio-political indicators, such as political participation and mobilization based on ethnicity that have strong implication for its role in shaping socio-economic development priorities and outcomes.

In the current study, the socio-economic priorities and indicators considered are advancements in GDP, GNP, and GNI as measures of economic growth and prosperity (Paul & Adoji, 2022); decrease in local poverty rates and improvement in quality of life for disadvantaged individuals (Li & Zhang, 2020); improved access to basic necessities such as clean water, healthcare, and housing; and enhanced educational standards across all levels and increased job opportunities indicating human capital development and economic diversification in Delta State (Rivera, Leon, Cornejo & Florez, 2023).

### **Ethnic Diversity, Ethnic Politicking and Socio-Economic Development in Delta State**

A large body of literature suggests that ethnic diversity is negatively related to social capital, especially trust and social networks (Alesina & Zhuravskaya, 2011; Dincer, 2011). Social networks have significant implications for promoting collective action and poverty reduction. One possibility is that different ethnic groups do not like mixing across ethnic lines, resulting in weaker collective action, including collective action on poverty reduction (Miguel, 2006). Yet another possible explanation is that community social sanctions stimulate collective action, but such sanctions are weaker in more ethnically diverse communities, in which social interaction between different ethnic groups is less common (Sturgis et al., 2011).

Given that social networks depend on trust, and trust is lower in more fractionalized societies, there are likely to be fewer labour market opportunities gleaned through word of mouth, which contributes to higher poverty. In addition to ethnic diversity influencing poverty via the discussed channels, a direct relationship between ethnic diversity and poverty could be hypothesized as well. Also, literature has revealed that ethnic diversity remains a source of socio-economic disadvantage which could include poverty. In fact, the persistence of poverty in certain areas could be associated with the inherent hierarchical structure which emerges from ethnic diversity.

Awaworyi Churchill et al. (2016a) argue that ethnic diversity is associated with an inherent hierarchical structure which projects one ethnic group as superior (ethnic majorities) over the other (ethnic minorities). This categorization of ethnic groups associated with diversity has been linked

directly with the persistence of poverty. For instance, in most communities in Asia and Africa, issues of poverty continually increase among ethnic minorities due to cumulative disadvantages over the course of their lives, reflecting lack of opportunities and discrimination faced by these individuals (Epprecht et al., 2011).

However, ethnic diversity need not always lead to poorer economic outcomes. New evidence from Depetris-Chauvin and Özak (2016) suggest that ethnic diversity has a positive effect on economic specialization and trade through promoting the division of labour. Similarly, Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2016) argue that at the local level ethnic diversity is positively associated with economic growth. They argue that a possible mechanism to explain the positive relationship between ethnic diversity and growth is the increased trade in the boundaries across ethnic groups due to specialization. As trade is a major factor affecting the livelihoods of poor people, it could be argued that ethnic diversity may negatively influence poverty. Ethnic diversity could lead to higher levels of innovation. For instance, Fafchamps (2000) argues that ethnic diversity could increase the talent pool and, therefore, increase the quality of local entrepreneurs. If this occurs, ethnic diversity could increase individual income, and, thus, one might expect poverty reducing effects of ethnic heterogeneity. On the other hand, ethnic diversity is associated with higher income and social inequality (Dincer & Lambert, 2012; Milanovic, 2003), which, it has been argued, exacerbates the incidence of poverty.

As national integration and identity weaken, a more ethnocentric approach dominates within federal systems like Nigeria's. Each ethnic group prioritizes their own interests, aiming to alleviate poverty and enhance socio-economic conditions within their community. This trend is evidenced by a rising demand for state autonomy in resource management, notably championed by the Niger Delta States. These states, including Cross River, Edo, Delta, Abia, Imo, Bayelsa, River, Akwa-Ibom, and Ondo, are major oil producers in Nigeria (Li & Zhang, 2020; Rivera, Leon, Cornejo & Florez, 2023; Fafchamps, 2000).

Although meeting these demands risks destabilizing Nigeria's economy, they underscore the prevalence of ethnic politics. Delta State, particularly, exemplifies this trend, as seen in its improving socio-economic indicators. By leveraging its oil resources, Delta State has influenced federal policies, securing infrastructure projects that bolster its GDP. Ultimately, ethnic groups that prioritize their identity tend to expedite their own development (Dincer & Lambert, 2012; Milanovic, 2003; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2016). The study thus argues that Delta State's socio-economic positioning may be found to correlate with an increasing level of ethnic politicking.

### **Research Method**

The study employed the cross sectional research design. This design was most appropriate and suitable for this study since it seeks to understand the frequency of the occurrence of a

phenomenon over a period of time across a population with varying demographic features. The population of the study is 237,489 (Nigeria Population Fact Sheet, 2023). The sample size of 399 was obtained using Taro Yamane formula for sample size determination. The study employed multistage sampling method also known as advanced cluster to select the communities that participated in the survey. Delta State was clustered in line with the three senatorial district groupings. The researcher randomly selected a local government area from each cluster (senatorial district). Furthermore, rural and urban communities were randomly selected from each local government area in the second group based on ethnic group and language. The instrument used for data collection was questionnaire. The first section consisted of items that evaluated the demographic characteristics of the respondents such as gender, age, educational qualification, marital status, religion, and occupation. The second section consisted of items that treated issues related to the phenomenon under discourse. Analysis of Variance was used to test the hypotheses to ascertain the mean score difference in the variables of the study. This was done using version 23 of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) that was used to run the analysis. Of the 399 respondents invited to participate in the study, a total of 373 duly filled questionnaires were retrieved for analysis.

**Results and Discussion**

**Test of Hypotheses**

**Hypothesis 1**

There is no significant relationship between ethnic politicking and socioeconomic development in Delta State

**Decision Rule:**

1. If the calculated p-value is less than 0.05, reject the null hypothesis (H0) and accept the alternative hypothesis (H1). Conclude that there is a statistically significant correlation between Ethnic Politicking and Socio-Economic Development.
2. If the calculated p-value is greater than or equal to 0.05, fail to reject the null hypothesis (H0). Conclude that there is no statistically significant correlation between Ethnic Politicking and Socio-Economic Development.

**Table 1 Analysis of Correlation** between Ethnic Politicking and Socioeconomic Development in Delta State

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>Decision</b>
<i>Ethnic Politicking</i>	1	.011	Statistically Significant
<i>Socio-Economic Development</i>	.253*	.011	

**Source: Fieldwork, 2023**

Results in table 1 show the analysis of correlation between ethnic Politicking and socioeconomic development in Delta State. From table 1, the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to



assess the relationship between Ethnic Politicking and Socio-Economic Development. The analysis revealed a very weak positive correlation,  $r(XX) = 0.011$ ,  $p = 0.011$ . This indicates that as levels of Ethnic Politicking increase, there is a slight tendency for Socio-Economic Development to also increase, and vice versa. The correlation was found to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level ( $p = 0.011$ )

### Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference between ethnic identity and poverty in Delta State.

**Table 3: Analysis of Variance on difference between Ethnic Identity and Poverty in Delta State**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Decision
Between Groups	.280	3	.093	.925	.001	Significant
Within Groups	213.402	373	.593			
Total	213.681	373				

**Source: Fieldwork, 2023**

Results in table 2 show the Analysis of Variance in difference ethnic identity and poverty in Delta State. From table 3, the F-ratio calculated value of .925 is greater than the significant value of .001. This means that there is a significant difference between ethnic identity ethnic and poverty in Delta State. This shows that ethnic identity is distinct from poverty in Delta State

### Discussion of Findings

The first hypothesis tested revealed that there is a significant relationship between ethnic identity and socioeconomic development in Delta State. This finding is in line with the work of Rosanwo (2012) who stated that the sociological human approach to diversity requires an understanding of the affinity that exist between individuals and values of a common descent. According to Rosanwo ethnic identity in itself is thus not a curse but the way it is managed, and ethnic identity in Nigerian is dialectically linked to her multi-ethnic characteristics that cannot be separated from her socioeconomic development, political and social stability. Itodo (2018) study aligns with the finding of the study as he argued that as Nigerian fortune has progressively waned, most Nigerians have recoiled back to focusing mainly on the interest of their ancestral origins while neglecting the overall interests of the country as a whole. In the view of the author, it is the same idea that encourages official corruption with each government official seizing the opportunity of his/her position for personal and family benefits first and foremost and next the interest of those who share his/her ethnic origins. For instance, the guarantee of employment or award of contract is a function of one's tribesperson in position of authority. The phrase "It is our turn" was coined from this practice. Merit and excellence are sacrificed on the altar of primordial thinking.

The second hypothesis tested showed that there is a significant difference between ethnic identity ethnic and poverty in Delta State. This is in tandem with Onyibo (2016) who stated that more so,

ethnic politics has created a deep rooted structural inequality in the distribution of education, employment and sharing of power. This has resulted in what we may describe as individual, tribal and regional, religious and at times gender ethnocentrism. There is on the individual level a colossal dearth of fair and equal participation in national life. Awaworyi Churchill et al. (2016a) also argued that ethnic diversity is associated with an inherent hierarchical structure which projects one ethnic group as superior (ethnic majorities) over the other (ethnic minorities). This categorization of ethnic groups associated with diversity has been linked directly with the persistence of poverty. For instance, in most communities in Asia and Africa, issues of poverty continually increase among ethnic minorities due to cumulative disadvantages over the course of their lives, reflecting lack of opportunities and discrimination faced by these individuals (Epprecht et al., 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The study concluded that there is a statistically significant relationship between ethnic identity and socioeconomic development in Delta State This was supported with literature that revealed that ethnic identity has effect on socioeconomic development from the ethnic group level and this particularly becomes possible because of political factors. The theory also establish that people within the ethnic group use ethnic symbols as basis of communication and this affects socioeconomic development initiatives.

The study also reached the conclusion that there is a significant difference between ethnic identity and poverty in Delta State. The study established that ethnic identity can be used to tackle the problems of poverty at the state level with the identification of minority groups that are most affected with poverty problems and proffering solutions to them.

### **Recommendations**

The study recommends that ethnic identity should be used as a tool not only for inclusivity as to the area of origin but should be geared towards development discourse on how it can be used to promote development among its members. Issues of ethnicity should be given positive colouration and pursuit from that angle to foster socioeconomic development through empowerment of the underprivileged ethnic groups.

Poverty alleviation has been at the centre of most government policies and ethnic identity can be used effectively to pursue and realize this. Ethnicity should be used for tackling problems that affect different regions by leaders who represent the interest of the masses at the state and local government level. This can be achieved through the election of credible and forthright people to the seat of power so as to champion the course of the people that will result in the amelioration of poverty among the people.

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