Transnational Corporations, State Capacity and Development in Nigeria

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/11/11/transnational-corporations-state-capacity-and-development-in-nigeria/

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In the past few decades, transnational corporations (TNCs) have become significant political and economic actors in the international political economy due to advances in globalisation, leading to growth in their power and influence (Macleod and Lewis, 2004). However, their contributions to contemporary world development are among the most intensely debated issues in the 21st century. While some studies acknowledge the influential roles played by the TNCs in transforming the global economy, especially in terms of production internationalisation and Global Value Chains (Whitfield et al., 2020), others contend that the TNCs have created imbalances in world development trajectories (Wei, 2010; Ahen, 2019). Notwithstanding these contradictory perspectives, TNCs continue to exercise significant global socio-political influence, thereby making it crucial to assess the developmental roles of the TNCs in order to understand if they are conducive or incompatible with the development of their host countries.

Using Nigeria as a case study and the dependency theory as an analytical framework, this essay argues that the ability of TNCs to contribute to the structural transformation and development of a country largely depends on states' capacity to regulate their activities and hold them accountable. Although TNCs are essential actors in Nigeria's developmental space, they serve as mechanisms of exploitation and underdevelopment (Eaton, 2017; Stephens, 2017). While Nigeria has benefited from the TNCs through infrastructural development and employment creation, their activities have produced social ills, such as increased poverty levels, political instability, environmental degradation, and human rights violations, due to the absence of an effective regulatory framework (Morvaridi, 2008; Eze, 2017). Consequently, these challenges have exacerbated development woes and deepened socio-economic inequality in Nigeria. However, the lack of state capacity to control the TNCs results from Nigeria's peripheral position in the international division of labour and the rent-seeking attitude of some Nigerian elites, who, because of their vested interests, sometimes use state power to advance the interests of foreign capital (Kohli, 2004; Watts 2004). This has made the role of the TNCs incompatible with Nigeria's development, as the adverse effects of their activities outweigh the positives.

Nigeria represents a typical case due to the operation of several TNCs in the country. The Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) operations in the Niger Delta region of the country will be employed as a case study. This essay proceeds as follows: the first section after this introduction discusses the basic assumptions of dependency theory, followed by an assessment of the impacts of the TNCs on Nigeria's development. The final section before the conclusion examines how the lack of state capacity to regulate the TNCs in Nigeria has contributed to its underdevelopment.

Theoretical Background

Dependency theory emerged as a reaction to the modernisation theory, which argues that the path to development is unilateral, unidimensional, and endogenously driven (Ntini, 2016). Modernisation theorists see TNCs as a crucial mechanism for promoting economic liberalisation and growth in third-world countries. However, proponents of the dependency theory argue that TNCs are instruments used by western governments to exploit and subjugate underdeveloped countries. The dependency theorists assume that the economic integration of the "periphery" into the western-controlled world capitalist system has resulted in relationship imbalances, leading to the impoverishment of the peripheries (Mahoney and Rodríguez-Franco, 2018). The dependency theory contends that a 'relationship of benefit' exists between capitalists in advanced industrialised countries and their compradors in less developed countries from foreign investments made by the TNCs (Namkoong, 1999). Consequently, this condition has perpetuated underdevelopment and led to widespread social deprivation, political oppression, and economic stagnation in third-world countries (Chan and Clark, 1991). Thus, the dependency theory sees the TNCs as exploitative actors in the stratified international political economy who only act to maximise profits without regard for the development of their host countries.

The major criticism of the dependency theory is the emphasis on external conditions as causes of underdevelopment in third-world countries and its inability to explain the economic development of newly industrialised countries (Sanchez, 2003). However, Kvangraven (2021) argues that the economic growth of some Asian countries does not negate the fundamental premise of the dependency theory. Moreover, as this essay will show, the overreliance on TNCs as drivers of economic development has several disadvantages, including human rights violations, social unrest, and environmental degradation.

Transnational Corporations and Their Impact on Nigeria's Development

The impacts of Transnational Corporations on Nigeria's development cannot be underestimated, despite being the subject of intense debate by policymakers, academics, and development practitioners. The contributions of TNCs to foreign direct investment (FDI) in Nigeria have stimulated economic growth. FDI is considered a catalyst for national development because it complements domestic investment, creates employment opportunities, promotes technology improvement, and enhances production efficiency (Adegboye et al., 2020). In the second quarter of 2021, Nigeria's FDI inflow was estimated to have increased by USD$1563.64 million by the Central Bank of Nigeria (Statista, 2022). Consequently, this led to an enlarged market, attracting further FDI and creating employment prospects for Nigeria's growing labour. A study by Tirimba and Macharia (2014) found TNCs to contribute to about 65 per cent of non-governmental job opportunities for the population in their host countries. In Nigeria, besides training 7072 Niger-Delta youths in management and enterprise development since their inception in 2003, 96 per cent of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) workforce in 2018 were Nigerians (Shell, 2018). In addition, the SPDC awarded about 92 per cent of contracts to Nigerian companies in 2018 and spent USD$ 1.3billion on those contracts (Shell, 2018). In addition to the provision of employment opportunities, this contribution has led to the growth of Nigeria's local industries and improved Nigeria's standard of living. Although Nigeria's unemployment rate is currently about 33.3 per cent (Nwokoma, 2021), it would have been worse without the contributions of the TNC to job creation and income generation in the country.

Furthermore, TNCs have assisted in providing essential infrastructures in Nigeria. There is a direct relationship between infrastructure and economic development as it increases productivity and improves the quality of life (Brenneman and Kerf, 2002; Gaal and Afrah, 2017). While Galadima (2014) sees the lack of infrastructure in the rural area as a significant factor affecting economic development in Nigeria, the TNCs have stepped in to complement government efforts by providing critical infrastructures or acting as a "surrogate sovereign" in the absence of government intervention (Kline, 2006:131). Compelled by the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) principles, TNCs have assisted local communities where they operate by improving basic infrastructures, such as roads, railways, water supply systems, health and educational facilities. CSR refers to a set of self-regulation that guides the behaviour and activities of transnational corporations to ensure conformity with ethical values and social justice, leading to societal well-being through social and environmental measures (O'Laughlin, 2008). Besides generating internal revenues for the Nigerian government, the SPDC contributes to the development of the Niger Delta area in Nigeria by making statutory contributions to the Niger Delta Development Commission (Idemudia, 2007). Also, the SPDC has engaged in several development initiatives through direct intervention or partnership with local and international development agencies. An example is the construction of the Ogbia–Nembe Road in Bayelsa state by SPDC in 2005 (Ite, 2007). Most of these roads were constructed in seasonally flooded and swampy areas, thereby providing the local communities access to their farmlands and means of livelihood, thus facilitating rural development.

However, the contribution of TNCs to development in Nigeria is marginal and is yet to bring any transformational impact on the country's development. TNCs are motivated by the desire to maximise profits while substantially minimising costs. Pattenden (2016) contends that an antagonistic relationship between capital and labour exists because capital aims to maximise productivity while reducing costs. In the process, the TNCs destabilise the resources of the third world and stagnate their labour to suit their profit-motivated objectives. By exploiting human and natural resources in their host countries, economic plunder and exploitation experienced during colonialism persist. Osuagwu and Obumneke (2013) argue that a large percentage of profits made by the TNCs are used to develop their home countries instead of reinvesting them in Nigeria. In addition, TNCs adopt strategies that handicap labour aspirations in developing countries. Armed with their technology, capital, and technical know-how, they take advantage of cheap labour and raw materials in these countries. Also, there have been concerns about how the operations of the TNCs affect working conditions and labour relations management in their host countries (Lund-Thomsen and Coe, 2015). For example, where the labour union in one subsidiary demands an improved service condition, they are replaced with personnel and skilled labour from another host country. In this way, they avoid the ability of labour in those places to negotiate for incentives and increase wages. This situation is worse for most contracted labours who endure labour coercion and abuse (Barrientos, 2013). For example, a report by IndustriALL found the SPDC guilty of maltreating their contract workers in the Niger Delta area by subjecting them to stringent work conditions, poor and stagnated wages, anti-union discrimination, and inadequate medical care (IndustriALL, 2018). This neo-imperialist tendency has contributed to the impoverishment of Nigeria and created developmental challenges, such as civil unrest, poverty, political instability, and environmental degradation (Oluwaniyi, 2019).

Moreover, TNCs have failed to fully abide by the CSR and other regulations that govern resource exploration and labour rights in Nigeria. The CSR activities of TNCs in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta, are mainly remedial as they aim at addressing the adverse effects of oil exploration instead of preventing them. As a result, the TNCs continue to engage in harmful environmental practices associated with oil and gas exploration, thus negating the sustainable development principle. This has led to gas flaring, oil spillage, and pollution with dire consequences on the ecosystem, agriculture, human health, biodiversity, and environmental sustainability (Elum et al., 2016; Bello and Nwaeke, 2020). For instance, it is estimated that about 1.5 million tons of oil have been spilt by SPDC in the Niger Delta region over the past fifty years (Brown, 2006). While oil spills are generally under-reported by TNCs, at least 115,000 oil barrels (15,000 tons) are spilt annually into the Niger Delta (Steiner, 2010). There is also clear evidence of double standards in the operations of the SDPC, as their activities do not comply with Nigerian law and internationally recognised standards of oil spillage prevention and control (Steiner, 2010; Oluduro and Oluduro, 2015). In addition, CSR has done little or nothing to improve working conditions in Nigeria. As stated earlier, workers continue to be subjected to unfair labour practices by the TNCs in Nigeria. The use of CSR projects by the TNCs has been argued to be nothing but a marketing or greenwashing strategy (Taylor, 2011; Asia Monitor Resource Center, 2012). This is why Lund-Thomsen and Coe (2015) contend that CSR alone is not enough, as it has a limited impact on the facilitation of worker agency. Nevertheless, CSR can serve as an avenue for positive dialogue between labour and the TNCs to improve their working conditions (Scheper, 2017; Liem, 2018).

The adverse effects of TNCs' activities have led to Nigeria's oil fields' ungovernability due to violent agitations by aggrieved ethnic militants and youths who felt alienated and exploited by transnational oil companies (Watts, 2007; 2004). The militants have engaged in workers' abduction and oil installations vandalism, leading to a decline in Nigeria's oil output, which negatively affects internal revenue generation and socioeconomic development (Ibaba, 2008; Albert et al., 2019). However, it is crucial to note that the TNCs are not solely responsible for Nigeria's development challenges, although they contribute majorly to the problems. The development crisis in Nigeria can also be attributed to factors such as misgovernance and maladministration by the Nigerian political class (Yagboyaju and Akinola, 2019).

State Capacity, Transnational Corporations and Underdevelopment in Nigeria

While the TNCs have contributed to underdevelopment in Nigeria, the lack of state capacity to regulate the TNCs makes the country a breeding ground for exploitation. State capacity refers to "the abilities of states to plan and execute policies and to enforce laws cleanly and transparently" (Fukuyama, 2004:7). Unfortunately, the regulation and governance of TNCs are ineffective in most "resource-rich, but economically poor" African countries due to weak institutions (Carmody, 2011:2). This is the case in Nigeria, where its position in the international division of labour as the producer of primary commodities makes the country unable to regulate the TNCs. Thus, the monolithic nature of Nigeria's economy is a significant cause of its economic dependence on international capital, and the TNCs are the most apparent agents of foreign capital in Nigeria. As a rentier state, Nigeria depends not only on oil but also earns most of its revenue from rents paid by the TNCs (Kohli, 2004). According to Akinola (2022), Nigeria generates about ninety per cent of its foreign exchange revenue from oil. The over-reliance on oil revenue implies that Nigerian government policies were directed at protecting the TNCs, who generate most of Nigeria's oil revenue and any opposition to the TNCs is seen as detrimental to national interests (Oluduro and Oluduro, 2015; Yusuf and Omoteso, 2016). This explains why most host countries often grant TNCs tax relief, and some TNCs deliberately evade tax without punishment. For instance, the SPDC and some companies were found to have benefited from a $3.3 billion tax break in Nigeria, worth twice Nigeria's annual health budget between 2004 and 2012 (Van Dorp, 2016). Consequently, this has eroded state sovereignty and increased TNCs' autonomy in Nigeria, making some scholars characterise the Nigerian state as weak and subservient to foreign interests (Kohli, 2004).

The lack of the state's capacity to regulate the TNCs' operations in Nigeria can also be explained by the rent-seeking nature of the Nigerian state. Kohli (2004) argues that the Nigerian state is neo-patrimonial, with politicians emphasising power maintenance and self-diversion of public resources over any actual developmental project. The focus on maintaining power by the political elites often encouraged the concentration of the control of economic activities, which promotes clientelism (Berenschot, 2018). The capital intensity of oil extraction has strengthened oil-producing states' economic and political elites at the expense of organised labour (Bebbington, 2018). As a result, there is a symbiotic relationship between TNCs and politicians in Nigeria due to the fundamentally compatible interests of local and foreign capital, thereby making the political class lack autonomy of action (Obi, 2009). This has undermined the host countries' national sovereignty and regulatory institutions (Bebbington, 2018). However, Omeje (2007) contends that Nigeria's rentier space is not only occupied by political elites and TNCs but the behaviour of other actors, such as local communities and civil societies, has been structured due to the centrality of oil rent. Thus, to achieve patrimonial accumulation, Yusuf and Omoteso (2016:1375) argue that Nigeria's political elites and oil companies often employ "divide and rule" tactics by inducing community leaders and a few youth leaders with gifts and contracts. Adunbi (2016:93) highlights how the Nigerian states, TNCs and non-governmental organisations constitute a "triangular power" by collaborating to make decisions that impoverish the oil-producing communities. This further corroborates Kohli's (2004) submission that none of the Nigerian government policies had any real development intention. Hence, the Nigerian governing elites cannot control and regulate the TNCs because of their selfish interests. Consequently, this increases the TNCs' power and promotes unhindered harmful environmental practices, thereby contributing to poverty, human rights violations, civil unrest, and underdevelopment in Nigeria. This makes the role of the TNCs incompatible with Nigeria's development despite their growing global importance.

Conclusion

This essay has critically assessed whether the role of transnational corporations is conducive or incompatible with the development of their host countries. It demonstrates that while the TNCs have sometimes acted as development agents in their host countries, their developmental contribution is marginal. For example, while the TNCs have assisted in providing infrastructures and employment opportunities in Nigeria, they engaged in poor environmental and labour management practices. Due to their profit maximisation objective, the TNCs have impoverished the Nigerian population and widened socioeconomic inequalities in Nigeria. Besides perpetuating underdevelopment, the activities of the TNC have also led to violent agitations by aggrieved ethnic militants and youths, which further distorts Nigeria's economy. However, the essay highlights the complicity of the Nigerian political elites in Nigeria's development challenges, as some of them collaborate with the TNCs to exploit Nigeria. Consequently, this has created a dysfunction between Nigeria's resource wealth and the country's development, thus further giving credence to the resource curse arguments espoused in literature (Watts, 2004; Gilberthorpe and Papyrakis, 2015).

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