

BEYOND FRAGILITY OR FAILURE: A GROUNDED THEORY OF THE FALLOW STATE

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Abstract

Why are some states trapped in the struggle to translate potentials into sustainable development? This study is focused on developing a substantive grounded theory of the fallow state to describe and explain how protracted stagnation is produced and maintained persistently. Deploying the Straussian Grounded Theory (SGT) approach, data were drawn from 24 participants (n=24) in two focus group discussions that involved academics and governance experts in the social science disciplines, and also a theoretical sampling of 26 peer-reviewed governance literature published between 2010 and 2024 was consulted. Nigeria served as the empirical case for context in deconstructing the theory of the failed state. The analysed data showed that what participants designated as stagnation emerged from a set of interconnected and supporting processes of economic dormancy, institutional depletion, administrative paralysis, human capital attrition, and civic dislocation. As with fallow agriculture land, over time, these interactions contribute to a systematically under-cultivated national capacity. The study recommended institutionalizing mechanism to deepen the democratisation process to restrict abuse of state power, empower the judiciary to play an active role in enforcing the rule of law to protect against elite capture of state resources, and provide robust investment in education and incentives to engage a productive workforce.

Keywords: Administrative paralysis, civic dislocation, economic dormancy, grounded theory, human capital attrition, stagnation

Introduction

Africa, with numerous natural resources, diverse cultures and a vibrant population, is still reckoned as the wretched of the earth. Many African countries (54) are still trapped in poverty and underdevelopment, and the debates on state capacity and performance are frequently placed on state fragility, collapse, weakness or failure that urgently requires reforms (Adeyemi & Ogundipe, 2019; Lindsey, 2021). Nigeria is a typical example of the African development paradox within the debate of a country with all the potential but struggling to develop. Despite its abundant human and natural resources, sustained development has remained elusive. The prevailing explanation generally points to pervasive corruption, institutional weakness, rent dependence, a disarticulated economy, or policy inconsistency (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Bracking, 2018; Ebohon, 2013; Hellman et al., 2003; Ifaka, 2019). While these labels provide significant insights, they often treat state failure or fragility as an outcome and fail to account for the process that evolved.

An analytical approach is presented of a process-based approach of how states with potential deteriorate, decline and erode capacity to function, rather than seeing the state capacity limited by constraining factors that produce unwanted or undesirable outcomes. Outcomes are inherently derived from process rather than emerging suddenly. The emergence limiting outcome propositions as identified by previous scholars like Barker (1985), Carment (2003), Meyns (2010), Bertocchi and Guerzoni (2012), Onyejiuwa and Ifaka (2024), and Rotberg (2024) narrow the factors to economic, political and governance, state capacity and institutional, structural and external, and international factors. The large variations among these Scholars and their identified factors create an impression of expanding ambiguity about understanding the state in Africa. The state is thus presented as a mysterious being without a defined path to deliverance and, in most cases, often evokes spiritual remedies -outside the realm of social and applied research- (Haar & Ellis, 2006; Bompani, 2015; Kame & Tshaka, 2015; Mamman & Zakaria, 2016; Golo & Novieto, 2022).

These previous studies are among the most cited works among academics, but they cause us to be more confused about answering our research questions on the state of Africa's development. Such accounts fail to present a holistic framework for understanding African states. This study emphasised how prolonged stagnation is created and normalised with the (ill)functioning of the state. Rather than adopt the state failure outcome approach (looking at the finished work), the researcher adopts the state as an object of becoming. Rather than identifying the Nigerian State as fragile (see the Fragile State Index) or a failed state (destroyed), the study conceptualises the stagnation approach as an evolving entity forming through constituent interactions among several institutions (economic, political, social), administrative practices, elite strategies and citizens' responses.

The prevailing sourcing for knowledge and practical gaps in explaining and understanding the African State's path to development warrant a grounded theory to attempt a better categorization, explanation and understanding of the African State condition. The Grounded theory methodology enhances our need for exploring a dynamic process of interdependent interactions without ignoring the conditions presumed as outcomes by other scholars. The work is not out to impose a theory framing over existing ones, but stresses the process of becoming stagnant.

To achieve empirical validation for the study, the researcher deployed a focus group study with academics and practitioners having broad hindsight of politics, governance and socioeconomic blend, and a survey of theoretical sampled literature. The process produced the concept of the fallow state, a metaphor associated with agricultural land left uncultivated as a perceived scheme to allow over-exploited, abused or misused resources to rest and recover. The period of fallow is to warrant recovery or restoration. The grounded theory purpose is occasioned by the need to present a substantive framework for dispelling the claim of an African state as failed, decayed, or fragile (insinuating the end of a state) and most instrumentally to explain with cognitive objective and interpretative validation of how a state goes through the process of abuse or misuse and can become fallow (with possibility) to recover.

Theoretical Analysis

Grounded theory is embedded in theory construction directly from data, and so likewise does not follow the norm of providing validation of existing established theories. This accounts for the reason why the theoretical analysis section is conventionally provided to outline sensitising

concepts that informed primary attention during data collection and analysis (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Yu & Smith, 2021). In this regard, the concept does not serve the need for an explanatory framework at this stage since the theoretical construction is still evolving and has not yet been established. Nigeria is typified as a classical African failed state and is embedded in the continent consciousness; it is therefore assumed that an understanding of the Nigerian State will help explore the African State Complex. Some conceptualisation of the Nigerian state is revealed.

The Nature and Character of the African State

Most scholarly work on exploring and describing the African State condition begins with highlighting the impact of colonial origin and the antecedents of postcolonial permanency. Studies have linked the African State to dominance of political and economic institutions owning centralised control of rent (rentier state) and presiding over a weak institutionalised social contract (often disappointing). African state portrays a sense of comprehensive intrusiveness (wanting to do everything but appearing to be negligent in delivering) and acts broadly partial, partisan, elite-driven, authoritative, patrimonial and predatory (Adesina, 2022; Young, 2023; Fadakinte, 2013, 2023; Ikome, 2007; Majumdar, 2007; Akinola & Makombe, 2024).

These studies reflect a state structure (concentration and centralisation) that has been persistently focused on power and struggling to consolidate institutional norms and administrative permanency. This trend accounts for a sensitised conception of the study towards the question of endurance without consolidation.

Despite Ekeh's (1975) exposition of two publics (civic and primordial) that reflect the divergent forces responsible for disagreeing on a chosen development path, recent studies have shown continuity in the two publics, reinforcing a pattern of lack of trust, unity, and obligation to the state and its development (Olaewaju et al., 2020; Otinche, 2021).

Elite Behaviour and Governance Trajectories

In African state literature, one of the prominent features is elite behaviour in the development process. The elite have shown a propensity to shape trends and determine outcomes in the public arena. As a dominant force in State affairs, elites are responsible for making decisions and allocating resources to projects, regions and divergent competing groups (Bebbington et al., 2018; Mate & Naseemullah, 2010; Slaven, 2021). States in Africa are essentially rentier (Ebohon, 2013; Standing, 2016; Ifaka, 2022), and the elite that preside over rentier states tend to prioritise and navigate between regime security and resource extraction, which constrain their strategy to be basically short-term. (Demarest & Victor, 2022; Omeje, 2021). The study reflects elite action as situational and part of the processual stagnation phase.

Limits of Existing Labels

Various labels (classification of terms) have been used to describe the state in Africa. Weak state (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2023; Jakwa, 2024; Müller-Crepon, Hunziker, & Cederman, 2021), fragile state (Clausen & Albrecht, 2022; Osemuyi & Festus, 2024; Grimm, Lemay-Hébert & Nay, 2015, 2016) or failed state (Mutongwizo & Mutongwizo, 2023; Isike & Olasupo, 2023; Rotberg, 2024). Rentier state (Ebohon, 2013; Ifaka, 2019b). These labels are usually Western-centric labels about the state of Africa without showing the process through which weakness, fragility or failure are produced through repeated dysfunctional political economic systems and structures, administrative practices and social interactions. This limitation informed the rationale for deploying a framework that prioritises dynamic process rather than static outcome. Essentially, the process is irrefutably responsible for the outcome (Cloutier & Langley, 2020). The decision to

adopt a grounded theory addresses the limitation of adequately explaining the African State trajectory from a holistic perspective.

Methodology

The methodology for the study is a qualitative method, adopting a focus group study and documentary analysis.

Research Design

The study deployed a Straussian Grounded Theory (SGT) approach that utilises systematic development of categories through continual comparison and retaining open variation in the process (Corbin, 2021; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023). The SGT is appropriate in offering a structured coding model that aligned with the study research objectives of describing, interpreting and explaining the fallow state trajectory. The SGT is applicable in inductive discovery and includes an opening and axial coding structure that explores the dynamism of conditions, context, interactions, and consequences. The dynamism provides an opportunity for explaining causal and qualified relationships in socio-political processes.

Data Sources

Two data sources were initiated and served as the basis for analysis. The first data source was derived from 2 Focus Group Studies. Focus Group A engaged 12 academics with expertise in political science, public administration, sociology, economics, and development studies. The second Focus Group B engaged 12 practitioners in public policy analysis, mass media, civil society organisations, local government administration and public service bureaucracy. The participants were selected for the study based on purposive sampling and maximum variation sampling to enhance diverse experiential and multidisciplinary perspectives. The second source of data was derived from 26 peer-reviewed articles and books between 2010 and 2024. Theoretical sampling emerged to explore categories being considered for the study.

Data Collection and Ethics

The two focus group studies were conducted with the physical presence of the participants in Benin City, Edo State (November 10, 2025, for Group A) and in Warri, Delta State (November 24, 2025). The sections were recorded with informed consent approval. The participant's identity was anonymised while the recording and transcripts were transcribed verbatim.

Coding and Analysis

Opening Coding

The coding began with the opening coding of the transcripts. A line-by-line analysis of the transcripts evokes constant comparison of codes that emerged: Accessing wealth without production, policy abandonment, institutional fatigue, administrative entrenchment, and skilled exit.

Axial Coding

In the axial coding, codes were compared and grouped to allow categories to be formed with constant engagement with the data. Adhering to the Straussian archetype of conditions, actions and consequences, similar relationships are paired, forming divergent categories.

Selective Coding

A uniform category emerged from the integration of all the codes to align with a core category that exposed a systematic non-cultivation of national capacity. The analysis was focused on the process basis of how state nature, character, evolution and current being occurred over time. The process incubated a transitional trajectory unfolding across economic dominance, sustaining elite accumulation, institutional, administrative, human and civic dimensions.

Methodology Rigour

To ensure methodological rigour and achieve objectivity, two coders autonomously analysed the transcripts. The exercise methodological resolved divergence through analytical discussion. Memos, coding matrices and diagrammes were deployed to track analytical decisions. Documentary sources complemented the results of the focus group study through triangulation.

Findings: Processes of the fallow State.

The findings revolve around the 5 core categories (Economic dormancy and accumulation by dispossession, institutional depletion, administrative paralysis, human capital attrition, and civic dislocation) explored in the study. These categories represent interrelated processes that produce the under-cultivation of state capabilities. These categories are discussed.

Economic Dormancy and Accumulation by Dispossession

This is the entry point of a cycle of stagnation construct. The cycle is embedded in the logic of an elite accumulation (not essentially capitalist-driven) that circumvents production but privileges non-productive returns. Elites with strong will and access to political power create opportunities to accelerate value extraction (with minimal value creation) through divergent schemes like dysfunctional privatisation targeted at asset stripping, contract inflation, regulatory manipulation, and import dependence. There is a neglect to develop a competitive, productive sector that can rival the rent drawn from unproductive elite schemes. While economic sectors related to production, distribution, and market exchange exist at the peripheral level, the elite direct state interest away from incentives that are derived from production-based economic activities. This diversion led to a loss in creativity and innovation, learning and employment engagement.

With strong elite manipulation and interference in economic activities (especially the non-productive sector), a displacement effect is created to expose the productive sector to artificial market signals that manifest in policy volatility, unprotected competition and neglect of infrastructure investment. Local domestic production is unsupported and intensely risky for investment, as entrepreneurship takes a slow pace to put capital to work and engage the market. While businesses struggle and grind slowly, extraction schemes become politically rewarding and offer faster economic gains that are safer. In the long run, the local economy is affected by poor incentives to produce, since production becomes costly, inefficient, import-dependent and consumption-driven under a concept of economic condition of dormancy.

The most glaring governance consequence with immediate effect is that economic policy prioritises elite accumulation and non-cultivation of local capabilities in furtherance of the management of distribution and access to rents. The sets of conditions have systematic effects on institutional structure, administrative function, civil engagement and human resources.

Human Capital Attrition

The human capital attribution lends itself as the transition mechanism of every productive economy. Labour must be in adequate supply and have the right skills to exploit the means of production to effect gainful use of resources to produce surplus value or meaningful profit. When

economic activities are artificially driven by elite manipulation, market signals contrast with production margins, which indelibly shape labour earnings, skills, and labour encounter crises of sustainability and survival. Organisations lose technical competence and professional expertise.

The Nigerian state public and civil service is endogenously captured and protected. It is a source of elite struggle and contention. The obvious code of engagement with the bureaucratic selection and recruitment to drive the state capacity is mostly based on the ascription of elite preference and ethnic consideration. The nation's constitution legitimises a spoil system of recruitment through the federal quota system. The state service is therefore drawn to a patron-client network (connection), leaving out the merit system that retains skilled persons. Inside the bureaucracy, competent persons with innovative skills and capabilities are subject to attack and stagnation from primordial sentiments.

The best personnel are prompted to face institutional frustration, blocked advancement and professional stagnation. Participants refer to the exit or personal constraint to exist as underutilised, suppressed, and competence is dissociated from reward. Skilled persons are forced to migrate from the public service to the private sector or exit the country to more competitive offerings. Attrition rate decouples the potential to cumulate capability, leaving the possibility for enhancing mentoring, institutional memory and technical depth and expanding the workload of remaining personnel at the service. This erosion of human capital directly undermines administrative capability.

Administrative Paralysis

Administrative structure is typified as the operational fulcrum through which the state expresses its will. It is the implementing machinery through which citizens interface with the state and realise the existence of the state as a vehicle of service delivery. The state essentially functions through the administrative bureaucratic structure.

Administrative paralysis emerges even with the persistence of bureaucratic structure and the strategic deformation of capacity to function. The essence of the bureaucracy is strictly tied to functionality and competency. As elites accumulate more power, they tend to control the bureaucracy or administrative structures for their own interest. Control of the bureaucracy requires advancement of political power and reduction of administrative capabilities or competence. Administrative systems can lose autonomy to function effectively as the structure's strongest assets (its human resources) can be manipulated through a non-merit-based recruitment and promotion process. Elite requires loyalty, compliance and procedural conformity that is empowered by discretionary abuse of official function. Efficiency is largely ignored under elite capture of the bureaucracy.

A meritocratic recruitment and promotion process can undermine elite capture and become a threat to elite dominance of the bureaucracy. Competent bureaucracy engenders predictability, supports transparency and institutional memory, making it a challenge for the use of discretionary extraction.

The locus of control of administrative structure tends to follow elite preference and coax behaviour in the bureaucracy towards elite dominance. Officials literally aspire towards survival and dependency on the elite's fierce control. The goal of the elite is to gain control and stabilise the bureaucracy as a tool for the facilitation of accumulation. Decision-making is consequently aimed at averting risk, providing fragmented and procedural steps that are sanctioned by the elite. Policy implementation is usually delayed when dealing with new conditions or when

difficulties present a challenge to explore. Routines and adaptation are self-protective governance mechanisms approved for the administrative system to continue to persist.

The administrative structure of the Nigerian state is rigidly defined to adapt rather than innovate in the contemporary context. Partitioners in the study identified the norms of administrative delay, procedural cautions, and coordination gaps in state bureaucracy relationships. The administrative structure of the state is constantly in a state of inertia towards responsiveness.

Institutional depletion

Institutions are regular and predictable rules and norms that shape state behaviour and policy. Administrative paralysis progressively reduces institutional efficacy. An institution essentially produces structural outcomes. With an administrative structure that persists and eroding capabilities, institutional strength to reinforce feedback is weakened, learning ability is decoupled, and coordination among state agencies (institutions) contracts. The effect is generally to cause a stable system stagnation. Policies are inconsistent, uncoordinated and unstable to avoid the maturity required to study a given pattern to track elite planned behaviour. Policy instability is intentional, as regime security may not guarantee elite survival in the future. The elite strategy is conditional on the short run.

Institutions become repositories of routine and portray reforms as means to absorb existing patterns of inertia. This depletion is cumulative and difficult to reverse. Each cycle of policy abandonment reduces confidence in institutional credibility, both internally among staff and externally among citizens.

Civil Dislocation

The social contract is embedded in the essence of the state and rationality to exist. Conformity to civic engagement is required in an orderly state. There must be a balance between state institutions (power) and social integration. This is ideally the motive for social stabilisation. When the state is unable to provide expected outcomes, citizens begin to adjust their expectations according to their lived experience. Civil dislocation occurs along the spectrum of expectation when expectation is close to or near the marginal edge or zero point. A condition of accumulated disappointment reinforces the saturation of displeasure with the social contract binding the state and citizens.

Citizen dislocation is associated with continued disengagement as expectations decline with civil participation in state affairs. With poor infrastructure, policy abandonment and low expectations, the transaction in the social contract erodes public trust. When the collective repeated demand for public goods to enhance citizen welfare and wellbeing is ignored customarily, civil pressure or public resistance declines over time. Elite accumulation tends to accelerate in reverse proportion to citizens' expectations. Policies in a failed state are routinely stagnant or may even decline, and they are largely patronage, symbolic and selective without legitimate support from society.

Civic dislocation thus closes the cycle by reducing incentives for productive transformation, reinforcing economic dormancy.

Discussion: The Fallow State as an Emergent Theory

Within these categories, the fallow state theory is best understood as a governance capability and a social, political, and economic systemic sustenance framework that explains how a state's political and administrative structures persist but inherently decline progressively in functional

capability to cultivate its national potentials. The framework is suitable for explaining a condition of adaptive stagnation as equilibrium in place of efficiency, continuity substituting for renewal, and extraction for displacement of production.

Instead of collapsing or failing, the state stabilises with low capability governance (at least exhibits the lowest benchmark for state persistence). This condition for the stability is induced, artificially imposed, not neutral and unnatural. Elite accumulation is at the centre of normalising decline for state institutions and administrative structures, as well as for citizens and the productive sectors.

The core phenomenon explained by the fallow state theory is the systemic under-cultivation of national capability. This is indicative of a condition in which economic, institutional, administrative, civic and human resources are in abundance but are dysfunctionally deployed to deviate from sustained development or even mere growth. Capability may be present but intentionally rendered inactive or inert. The state does not lack resources, but there are manifest incentives for elite accumulation in the short run while constraining the national institution, administrative structure, and governance network (elites and citizens) to gain long-term cultivation.

The fallow state theory represents a framework for explaining how stagnation is actively governed through a relational, adaptive and internally coherent system that is designed to incapacitate development. Stagnation is thus a cyclical process that reinforces mutations of state capabilities reflected in economic dormancy and accumulation by dispossession, institutional depletion, administrative paralysis, human capital attrition, and civil dislocation.

Conclusion

The study utilises Strassman's grounded theory to develop the fallow state that explains how protracted stagnation is produced and sustained as an interactive governance process rather than state weakness, fragility or failure. Analytically, 5 categories that systematically interact exhibit economic dormancy, institutional depletion, administrative paralysis, human capital attrition and civic dislocation manifest over time to stabilise a condition of under-cultivation of national capacity. Based on SGT, the theory emerged from focus groups and documentary samples where participants' accounts and constant comparison inductively explain how stagnation is produced. Stagnation is maintained through adaptive behaviours that strategically prioritise survival over productive transformation. The fallow state in the tradition of discoverable theory (as grounded theory assumptions) does not claim universal application but seeks to offer a deeper conceptual reflection of how governance institutions can persist without adding value or remaining developmentally incapacitated. While the study contributes to ground theory scholarship by looking at the state from a process-oriented qualitative analysis, the insights provided explanatory powers underlying complex dynamics beyond rentier, failed, collapsed, weak or decayed states. The study is, however, rich in depth as it stimulates a conceptual foundation for further comparative studies and longitudinal research focusing on stagnation and governance capacity.

Recommendations

The challenges for a failed state of Africa are that they are deeply rooted and complexly dynamic, which inherently requires a long-term reformation or restructuring of governance capability, state disposition towards citizens, and socioeconomic conditions that are institutionalised within a deliberate custom and policy fashion, rather than episodic interventions. Specifically, these should take the shape of:

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- i. Addressing the decay of state capture requires deepening democratisation to restrict abuse of state power and ensure that state power is acquired legitimately. The judiciary should play an active role in enforcing the rule of law that protects the state from elite capture and abuse. Establish a transparent resource allocation and accountability mechanism that deploys technology such as blockchain to monitor and enforce procurement and spending limits of public office holders.
- ii. Recuse the machinery of the state bureaucracy from elite capture and manipulation by engaging civil society and technology in promoting transparent conduct of merit-based recruitment, promotion and encouraging a retention system that strengthens state capacity by reducing and eliminating administrative paralysis. Address the issue of competitive remuneration, bureaucratic professional autonomy, and institutional continuity to retain skilled personnel in the public and civil services.
- iii. Prioritise state productive economic transformation against the extractive accumulation and public dispossession by a few elites. Diversifying the economy across the agriculture and mining, industrial and manufacturing, and service sectors can create inclusive economic participation and wealth distribution that leverages inclusiveness to empower citizens with opportunities. A strong, inclusive economy is a prerequisite to deepening democratisation and resisting elite manipulation. An empowered citizen can resist the temptation of selling their vote during elections.
- iv. Governance institutions require active engagement of the judiciary and civil society organisations.
- v. Investment in education also have long term effect in addressing governance crisis, since citizens know their rights and can challenge elite behaviour towards primitive accumulation and public dispossessions programmes. Investment in education should focus on productivity and technological advancement rather than mere certification. Competence should be rewarded. Universities and training institutions should be directly linked to national productivity priorities areas to reverse the fallow use of human resources, while deployment is focused on needs assessments with incentives programmes.
- vi. There is a need to rebuild civic trust and public legitimacy through deliberate, inclusive governance programmes and an institutionalised policy implementation framework that targets service delivery. A redistributive programme built on social justice can quickly gain citizen trust, cooperation and commitment towards the state and its sustained development.
- vii. Future research is required for a comparative study to quantitatively measure the core categories of the study.

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