ENERGY INSECURITY AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA, 2020–2025

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Abstract

Despite the southeast Nigeria's reputation for industrial ingenuity and entrepreneurial dynamism, electricity scarcity continues to erode productivity, limit job creation, and deepen household vulnerability. This study therefore investigates the direct impacts of energy insecurity on productivity, employment, and welfare, while examining how political and institutional dynamics shape and sustain these outcomes. Following the theoretical lens of Political Economy of Energy and Neo-Dependency frameworks, the study employs a qualitative case study design, combining in-depth interviews with fifty participants including household heads, small-scale entrepreneurs, and public officials across the five Southeastern states. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 to identify structural patterns of exclusion and political control within the energy sector. Our findings revealed that chronic under-electrification in the Southeast is less a technical lapse than a political artefact. Electricity scarcity functions as a governance mechanism through which access is rationed, dependency reinforced, and regional autonomy constrained. Institutional fragmentation, rent-seeking, and federal dominance over distribution perpetuate infrastructural neglect and economic stagnation. The study concluded that energy insecurity mirrors broader patterns of structural inequality and centralized control in Nigeria's federal arrangement. It recommends among others, a deliberate shift toward decentralized energy governance, community-managed renewables, and transparent regulation as pathways for restoring productivity, equity, and sustainable development in the Southeast.

Keywords: *Energy insecurity, political economy, Southeast Nigeria, development, electricity access, Prebendal politics.*

Introduction

Regarded as the most commercially active and industrially driven subnational regions in the country, Southeast Nigeria comprises of Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo, and Ebonyi state. Markets, small industries, and service clusters generate steady economic movement across these five states. Yet this momentum is constantly disrupted by a familiar constraint such as electricity

failure. As Nneze, Ezeodili and Nze (2024) noted, power outages, unstable voltage, diesel dependence, and enforced reliance on generators have made energy insecurity a routine condition for households, firms, and local governments. While electricity problems are often framed as a national crisis, the impact is uneven. Alita, Ajaegbo, Asu and Cyprian-Oga (2023) showed that Nigeria is stuck between its oil-based infrastructure and the need to reform and diversify its energy systems. That tension is most visible in places like the Southeast, where economic activity grows faster than the grid can support it. National debate, however, tend to focus on pipelines and export revenue, yet, it is regional economies that bear the daily consequences of power failure.

Interestingly, energy insecurity in Nigeria is not only a technical failure. Moka, Akomolafe and Ogbebor (2025) linked recurring outages to sabotage, regulatory weakness, infrastructural decay, and poor implementation of energy policy. Abdallah and Odeleke (2023) further warned that without reforms in regulation, diversification, and renewable investment, the country risks deepening existing dependency traps. These national lapses translate into local losses higher production costs, stalled investments, and reduced competitiveness. The political dimension is becoming more evident. Lilian (2025) traced the persistence of energy poverty to patronage networks, weak oversight, and neglect of infrastructure factors that reflect the Southeast's experience. Nneze, Ezeodili and Nze (2024) further showed how unreliable supply undermines job creation and industrial output in the region. These works suggest that power is not just a utility but a political and developmental resource.

Our research builds on the above insight by examining how energy insecurity in the Southeast is shaped and sustained. Rather than treat scarcity as accidental, it interrogated the political and institutional arrangements that influence distribution, regulation, and access. The paper therefore raised the following research questions;

i. How does energy insecurity reflected in outage frequency, energy costs, and unreliable grid supply affect industrial productivity, employment, and household income in Southeast Nigeria?

ii. To what extent do political and institutional factors such as elite control, regulatory weakness, and biased infrastructural investment mediate the relationship between energy insecurity and regional development?

The objectives of this study are;

i. To evaluate the direct impacts of energy insecurity on productivity, employment, and household welfare in Southeast Nigeria.

ii. To examine how political and institutional dynamics shape, sustain, or worsen these effects.

The paper adopted a political economy of infrastructure approach, drawing on neo-dependency thinking to explain how governance practices and internal power structures reproduce unequal access and uneven development. Through this lens, the Southeast becomes a strategic case for understanding how energy scarcity both reflects and reinforces broader structural inequalities.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Energy Insecurity as a Political Outcome

Over the years, the prevalent electricity scarcity in Southeast Nigeria was often narrated as a technical shortfall or infrastructural lapse, but such explanations missed the political architecture that produces and maintains this condition. Scholars like Ake (1996) reminded us that resource governance in postcolonial African states is not a neutral administrative activity but a terrain of power in which access is rationed, withheld, and negotiated to serve political interests. Watts (2004) makes a similar intervention, demonstrating that infrastructures whether pipelines, grids, or extractive corridors are not developmental artefacts in isolation but extensions of accumulation and exclusionary control. This reframing matters because it shifts the conversation from questions of capability to questions of intent and structure. The rolling blackouts and chronic under-supply in cities such as Aba, Enugu, Onitsha, Nnewi, and Umuahia are not symptoms of incapacity alone; they represent a calibrated system in which scarcity is both administratively convenient and economically beneficial to those positioned to broker access. What passes as institutional failure is, in practice, a logic of selective distribution where deprivation is normalized and even monetized.

The work of Gregory and Sovacool (2019) strengthens this interpretation by challenging the familiar charge that 'poor governance' in Africa is simply corruption or weak bureaucracy. They showed how international financial actors, particularly the World Bank, have advanced market-based energy models that push infrastructural costs onto private investors while refusing to address the structural conditions that make such investments unviable in places like the Southeast. The result is not withdrawal by accident, but a political economy in which under-electrification is reproduced through policy architectures that externalize responsibility and protect existing hierarchies.

What makes this system durable is not crisis, but routine. Heinrichs (2024) argued that energy crises persist because political actors default to entrenched responses that stabilize rather than unsettle the prevailing order. Nigeria exemplifies this pattern. Each blackout produces reactive rhetoric, ad hoc committees, and recycled stopgap measures rather than structural reform. In the Southeast, the reliance on generators has graduated from improvisation to entrenched economy one that benefits diesel importers, generator vendors, and state officials who quietly gain from regulatory stasis. Scarcity becomes self-reinforcing not through incompetence, but through patterned habits of governance.

Conversely, Mao (2025) widened the critique by drawing attention to how both statist and market-led energy regimes in Africa sustain historical inequities under the dual logics of petro-capital and green transition. Where state centralization and private investment intersect, regions outside the primary circuits of national energy politics such as the Southeast are consigned to infrastructural marginality. He argued that electricity allocation follows networks of power, not maps of need. Grid expansion is shaped by federal patronage, investment risk calculations, and political loyalty, rather than distributive justice. What emerged from these perspectives is a clear argument that energy insecurity in Southeast Nigeria is not a technical malfunction awaiting

technical repair. It is a political artefact sustained by institutional routines, profit-making arrangements, and governance models that privilege centralised actors while rendering regional deprivation ordinary. However, the real question therefore, is not why megawatts are insufficient, but why scarcity remains advantageous to those who manage access. Thus, electricity deprivation in the Southeast is best understood as a system of rule where light is selectively allocated, darkness is administratively tolerated, and inequality is reproduced through the everyday operations of governance itself.

Energy Governance and Political Economy in Nigeria and Africa

Unlike previous assumptions, Nigeria's electricity crisis is less a failure of engineering than a symptom of a governance architecture structured around competing political and economic interests. Reform initiatives from the Electric Power Sector Reform Act of 2005 to the National Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Policy of 2015 have not collapsed for lack of ideas. Rather, as Garba and Abubakar (2025) showed, the sector is paralyzed by institutional fragmentation, unstable tariff regimes and a financing model that deters sustained private investment. Policy exists in abundance, yet implementation is mediated through bureaucracies more attuned to patronage than public service. Ake's (1996) argument that governance outcomes in Africa reflect underlying struggles over power and resource distribution rather than administrative error is sharply borne out here: electrification becomes a political transaction, not a developmental guarantee.

The prevailing assumption among donors and state actors that liberalization will automatically attract private capital has proven misplaced. Nigeria's regulatory ambiguity and weak risk guarantees mean that decentralized energy options such as mini-grids and solar systems float more in policy rhetoric than in execution. Even Kenya and India, often presented as reform models, succeeded not through market signaling alone but through de-risking strategies and blended finance that Nigeria has not institutionalized. What emerges is neither a command economy nor a functional market, but a hybrid arrangement where the state alternates between reluctance to relinquish control and incapacity to lead decisively.

The structural malaise extends beyond policy incoherence. Motswaledi and Motloung (2025) demonstrate that both state-owned and private utilities in Nigeria and South Africa reproduce similar governance failures corruption, political interference and rent-seeking regardless of ownership structure. This challenges the persistent neoliberal claim that privatization by itself cures inefficiency. Principal–agent tensions run through both domains: managers often pursue private gain or political loyalty, while oversight institutions lack either the autonomy or the will to demand accountability. What is branded as reform frequently disguises a redistribution of rents within familiar networks rather than a reordering of institutional practice. Their intervention is especially useful in foregrounding the uneven geography of energy exclusion. Access to electricity in Nigeria is not only a technical metric but a function of political relevance, class position and regional identity. Communities in the rural North-East, for instance, are structurally marginalized not by accident but by design, reinforcing Ake's contention that

development is rationed according to power hierarchies. Energy deprivation thus becomes a mode of governance, not simply a market failure.

These domestic dynamics are intensified by global political economy pressures. As Udeogu (2025) demonstrates, the contest between the United States and OPEC has destabilized Nigeria's oil earnings and strained the fiscal base on which infrastructure investment depends. With the national debt surging past ₦87 trillion in 2023, the capacity to underwrite energy reform is conditioned by forces well beyond national control (Udeogu, (2025). This is the paradox of a rentier state: energy transition is rhetorically endorsed but materially constrained by the volatility of the very commodity that funds it.

The external dimension is further compounded by what Edmond, Forku and Farag (2025) described as the renewed scramble for African resources. Their work, though focused on contexts such as the DRC, Niger and Mali, speaks directly to Nigeria's entanglement with international capital. Resource rents serve as instruments of elite consolidation and geopolitical leverage, often undermining transparency and weakening citizen oversight. Whether through Western oil firms, Chinese infrastructure deals or Russian security partnerships, external actors shape the governance of energy far more than formal policy documents suggest. These strands reinforce Ake's insight that development in Africa is a political endeavour shaped by contestation, patronage and dependency, not neutral planning. They also echo Watts' (2004) broader claim that extractive and energy governance on the continent is embedded in transnational circuits of accumulation and security. In Nigeria, the persistence of electricity poverty is not a failure of technical capacity alone, but the outcome of a political economy that places regime survival, elite negotiation and external alignment above equitable access. Until reform confronts these systemic entanglements, new policies will simply recycle old failures under revised institutional language.

Neo-Dependency, and the Politics of Energy Access

Neo-dependency thinking unsettles the old orthodoxy that Africa's underdevelopment is merely the residue of external domination. As Amin (1976) and Beckman (1981) argued decades ago, the postcolonial state did not dismantle the colonial political economy it retrenched it. Dependency migrated inward. Local elites repurposed inherited institutions, distributional channels, and patronage structures to manage access, not to equalize it. In that sense, infrastructure, electricity, and resource allocation were never neutral technocratic domains; they became levers of control embedded in domestic political bargaining. Nigeria epitomizes this internalization of dependency. Successive governments have retained a centralized grip on energy governance while rhetorically committing to reform. The result, as Elaigwu (2011), Ikelegbe (2005) and Omeje (2016) observed, is not an absence of policy but the use of federal authority as a gatekeeping device. Electricity distribution is nominally decentralized but substantively mediated by regulatory choke-points, concession arrangements and executive discretion. The Southeast provides an especially stark illustration: private distribution companies were handed control without matching investment or oversight. What Beckman

would call "mediated dependency" takes form here citizens pay for unreliable supply while informal, diesel-based alternatives proliferate in the vacuum left by failed public provision. Rivera-Williams (2025) traced them to the longue durée of infrastructural politics colonial-era concentration of services in select urban corridors, postcolonial reluctance to redistribute capital, and a donor environment more interested in policy announcements than structural change. In that frame, energy poverty is not a glitch in the system but a rational outcome of how the state manages scarcity. The ubiquity of generators and neighborhood-level fixes in the Southeast signals more than institutional weakness; it marks a form of coerced self-provision under conditions of organized neglect.

The political dimension is sharpened by unresolved tensions over resource control and federal restructuring. James and Akyar (2025) show how centralized decision-making over infrastructure and fiscal flows not only shapes who receives electricity but who is imagined as entitled to it. Tariff regimes, grid expansion, and transmission priorities are set at the federal level with minimal regard for regional need or economic productivity. Regions like the Southeast lacking the leverage of oil blocs or dominant voting blocs remain in a perpetual cycle of negotiation rather than entitlement.

Raji (2024) analysis of fiscal federalism in Nigeria exposed how revenue allocation and budgetary discretion reinforce this asymmetry. Energy projects are conceived, funded, and executed through a centralized apparatus that answers to political hierarchy rather than developmental logic. Regions positioned outside those hierarchies must absorb the consequences of infrastructural abandonment without the authority to correct its causes. Decentralization, in official rhetoric, disguises the deeper truth that control over electricity remains tethered to the federal center. What neo-dependency theory clarifies is that external actors are no longer the sole architects of subordination. Multinationals and donors still matter, but internal brokers' regulators, concessionaires, ministries, party elites are now the principal managers of exclusion. Privatization did not disrupt dependency; it re-routed it through domestic intermediaries who allocate connection, scarcity, and profit. Reform generates visibility but not transformation because it is layered onto a system designed to ration benefit rather than guarantee provision. Seen from this lens, the Southeast's energy crisis is not a story of inadequate supply or technical incompetence; it is the everyday expression of a political economy that treats electricity as a discretionary asset. Who connects, who waits, and who turns to generators are decisions embedded in governance practices rather than infrastructural misfortune. Neo-dependency, here, is not an abstraction it is the lived architecture of the postcolonial state and the logic through which access, exclusion, and dependency are continuously reproduced.

Core Analytical Concepts

Instead of treating concepts as static definitions, the study engaged them as interpretive tools for understanding how energy governance in Southeast Nigeria is produced, rationed, and politicized. Energy insecurity in this context is not simply an electricity deficit but a political condition shaped by governance failures, uneven reform outcomes, and the marketization of

basic infrastructure. Scholars like Sambo (2008) and Adenikinju (2005) have shown that access to electricity in Nigeria has long been filtered through unstable regulatory systems and fragmented investments rather than coherent national planning. More recent work, including Alita et al (2023), reinforces this by linking Nigeria's domestic energy challenges to the way state policy navigates international energy diplomacy and internal priorities. Energy scarcity, therefore, is less about the absence of capacity than about how power, planning, and institutional discretion determine who gets connected and who off-grid remains. Infrastructural injustice captures the way spatial inequality is reproduced through state planning and investment choices. Obi (2020) has shown that federal allocation patterns reinforce exclusion by concentrating infrastructure in politically connected zones while presenting neglect as technical limitation. Eberhard et al. (2011), writing on African energy systems, note that infrastructural buildout often mirrors elite influence rather than economic need. In regions like the Southeast, privatized distribution and stalled federal projects deepen a sense of abandonment rather than inclusion. What appears as policy failure is, on closer inspection, the outcome of negotiated infrastructure rather than universal service delivery. Prebendal politics offers another interpretive layer. Joseph's original formulation is useful, but the concept has evolved in sector-specific scholarship. Suberu (1999) and Ibrahim (2003) show how state institutions operate as channels of patronage, where control over electricity distribution and regulatory concessions reflects bargaining power rather than development goals. In the power sector, Okoji (2018) illustrates how reform opened new avenues for rent-seeking rather than transparency. What emerges is a system where access to infrastructure becomes an extension of political loyalty, and scarcity can be useful for maintaining leverage.

Uneven development provides a historical and structural lens. Amin's (1976) critique of internalized dependency remains strikingly relevant, especially when read alongside Elaigwu (2011) work on federal imbalance and Beckman's (1981) analysis of postcolonial state capitalism. These authors show that underdevelopment is not a passive condition but an actively reproduced arrangement. Applied to electricity access, it explains why regions with high commercial activity like the Southeast remain structurally disadvantaged despite contributing significantly to national markets. The issue is not incapacity but the political calculus of distribution.

These concepts help move the analysis beyond technical accounts of failure. They reveal energy insecurity as a political artefact, infrastructural injustice as a patterned outcome, prebendal politics as an organizing logic, and uneven development as a continuing structure. Rather than isolate these dynamics, the study uses them collectively to interpret how electricity access is governed, withheld, and contested in southeastern Nigeria. The frameworks of energy insecurity, political economy, and neo-dependency provide a lens to interpret Southeast Nigeria's electricity challenges as political and institutional outcomes rather than mere technical failures (Ake, 1996; Watts, 2004; Amin, 1976). Energy scarcity is produced through governance routines, regulatory bottlenecks, and selective distribution of resources, while prebendalism and uneven development explain why regions with high industrial demand remain chronically underserved (Joseph, 1987; Omeje, 2018; Motswaledi & Motloung, 2025). Neo-dependency

highlights how internal elites mediate access and scarcity, reproducing dependency through state institutions, patronage, and policy frameworks (Beckman, 1981; Elaigwu, 2011). Electricity provision in the Southeast thus reflects historical legacies, federal bias, and political bargaining rather than neutral development priorities. By situating scarcity within these intertwined political, economic, and institutional dynamics, the study moves beyond technical explanations to examine how governance choices shape productivity, household coping strategies, and broader development outcomes (Alita, 2023; Rivera-Williams, 2025). In this sense, electricity access becomes both a developmental and political question: who benefits, who bears the cost, and how reform efforts reproduce or challenge entrenched inequalities. This theoretical bridge guides the study's analysis of energy insecurity as a lived, structured, and politically mediated condition.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to examine the relationship between energy insecurity, productivity, employment, and household welfare in Southeast Nigeria, while highlighting the political and institutional factors that shape these outcomes. Data were drawn from government reports, policy documents, energy sector publications, and scholarly analyses, complemented by semi-structured interviews with household heads, small and medium enterprise operators, and local energy administrators. This combination captured both the material consequences of electricity scarcity such as lost work hours, business interruptions, and increased household costs and the institutional practices and political decisions that sustain these conditions.

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns linking state actions, regulatory processes, and social outcomes, framed through neo-dependency, prebendal politics, and uneven development. The study focused on how political actors, private concessionaires, and local intermediaries negotiate energy access, and how these negotiations produce inequality across communities. The methodology showed how energy scarcity is both a practical challenge and a political outcome shaped by governance choices, institutional arrangements, and broader national and international pressures. This approach directly addresses the study's objectives, revealing how energy insecurity affects livelihoods while reflecting the power structures that reproduce it.

Fieldwork was adjusted where necessary to minimise the effects of respondent fatigue and logistical constraints. Interviews were scheduled at times convenient to participants, and where respondents were unavailable for extended sessions, the interviews were conducted in shorter and more manageable sittings without compromising the key areas covered by the interview guide. In Ebonyi State, additional time was allowed for field visits because of poor feeder roads and irregular transport, while interview locations were coordinated to reduce unnecessary movement between communities. These adjustments helped maintain participation and allowed the research team to complete the interviews across the five states without substantially altering the study design.

Findings/Discussion

Section 1. Data Collection and Field Context (February–June 2025)

Fieldwork for this study was carried out between February and June 2025 across the five states of Southeast Nigeria Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo, and Ebonyi. The research adopted a qualitative, multi-site design supported by limited quantitative descriptors. A total of 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted using a purposive sampling strategy that targeted households, small- and medium-scale enterprise (SME) operators, and local energy officials. The interview instrument explored four broad themes derived from the research questions: (a) forms and frequency of energy disruption, (b) coping responses, (c) institutional and political determinants, and (d) perceived regional disparities in infrastructure provision.

Interviews were conducted in English, Igbo, or a mix of both, depending on respondents' preference, and lasted between 35 and 65 minutes. All participants provided oral informed consent after being briefed on confidentiality and voluntary participation. Data were recorded, transcribed, and later coded in NVivo 14 using a hybrid coding frame that combined deductive themes drawn from the theoretical framework (neo-dependency, prebendalism, uneven development) with inductive codes emerging from the transcripts. Field notes captured contextual details such as the reliability of local feeders, visible generator use, and social conversations around power supply.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by State and Category (N = 50)

State	Household Heads	SME Operators	Energy Officials	Total
Abia	6	3	1	10
Anambra	6	3	1	10
Enugu	6	3	1	10
Imo	6	3	1	10
Ebonyi	6	3	1	10
Total	30	15	5	50

Source: Author's field survey (2025).

Field Conditions and Access

From table 1. It showed that access to respondents varied sharply by geography. In Abia and Anambra, industrial clusters such as Ariaria and Nnewi provided high concentrations of SMEs, but interviews were repeatedly interrupted by power cuts and generator noise. Enugu and Imo presented mixed urban–rural dynamics; officials were accessible, but households in peri-urban zones often requested compensation for time because of "survey fatigue" from previous donor assessments. Ebonyi was logistically demanding: poor feeder roads and irregular transport

schedules stretched data collection to nearly four weeks. These conditions themselves became part of the evidence, showing how infrastructural decay complicates not only production but also research logistics.

NVivo thematic analysis generated seven dominant nodes: outage frequency, cost escalation, production downtime, coping mechanism, administrative constraint, political interference, and regional inequality. Coding density was highest for "outage frequency" and "cost escalation," followed by "coping mechanism," suggesting the salience of energy insecurity in everyday experience across all respondent types.

Energy Insecurity and Industrial Productivity

Data from SME operators across the region point to a deep entanglement between erratic electricity supply and the performance of small industries that form the backbone of the Southeast economy. In the NVivo output, the "production downtime" node contained 146 references across 15 SME transcripts, the highest among all non-household codes.

Table 2. Reported Frequency of Outages and Estimated Production Loss among SMEs

State	Average outage frequency (days/week)	Average hours lost per week	Average monthly	SMEs reporting layoffs (%)
Abia (Aba)	5.4	17 h	620,000	40
Anambra (Nnewi)	4.9	15 h	580,000	33
Enugu	4.1	12 h	430,000	27
Imo	5.2	16 h	560,000	35
Ebonyi	5.8	18 h	510,000	30
Regional mean	5.1	15.6 h	540,000	33

Source: *Author's field survey (2025).*

The data in table 2 above revealed that outages occur on average five days each week, resulting in roughly 16 hours of lost productive time. Diesel expenditure absorbs an average of ₦540,000 per SME per month—nearly one-third of operating cost. These findings are consistent with the 2024 South-East Economic Development Report that recorded a 29 percent fall in output among light manufacturers due to power unreliability (Ministry of Trade & Investment, 2024).

SME narratives give texture to these numbers. A spare-parts fabricator in Nnewi observed: *"We plan for power the way farmers plan for rain. You don't know when it comes; you just hope today will favour you."* Similar sentiments echoed across Aba's garment clusters, where factory owners described the droning of generators as "the soundtrack of our lives."

Analysis of the coded data shows a strong co-occurrence between "cost escalation" and "production downtime." NVivo's cross-tab query reported a Pearson correlation of 0.81, indicating that enterprises suffering more frequent outages also recorded higher fuel expenditures and reduced staff hours. Thematic mapping further linked these patterns to capital flight: some respondents disclosed intentions to relocate production to Lagos or Asaba where power supply, though costly, is more predictable. The discussion revealed that energy insecurity undermines not only immediate productivity but also regional industrial competitiveness. Through the lens of uneven development theory, the Southeast's high entrepreneurial density has not translated into sustained accumulation because the infrastructure base remains fragile. Neo-dependency perspectives reinforce this interpretation local industries remain dependent on imported generators, foreign-made spare parts, and fuel pricing structures they cannot influence. In effect, energy insecurity converts a potentially self-sufficient region into a consumer of external technologies, draining value that could have supported endogenous industrial growth.

Household Welfare and Adaptive Responses

Electricity scarcity in the Southeast has moved beyond inconvenience it has become a defining feature of everyday life, shaping welfare, consumption patterns, and social stability. The 2025 field data gathered across 25 households and 15 small-scale business owners reveal that most families experience an average of 16-20 hours of daily outage, with weekends slightly better in urban centers such as Enugu and Awka. Using NVivo thematic coding, three core themes emerged: (a) adaptive improvisation, (b) economic burden, and (c) emotional fatigue.

Household coping strategies followed a predictable but unequal pattern. Families with middle incomes rely on petrol generators, while lower-income respondents have shifted to kerosene lamps, solar lanterns, and shared neighborhood "charging hubs." In Abia, six of ten households reported pooling resources monthly to buy fuel collectively, while in Imo, community-level solar contributions are emerging, especially in suburban Owerri West. One respondent from Aba (female, 37) captured the tone of many interviews:

"*It's not even about having light anymore; it's about surviving the absence of it. We have learned to budget for darkness*."

This statement encapsulates what respondents in Ebonyi and Anambra echoed repeatedly energy insecurity is normalized and now determines how families prioritize expenditure.

Table 3. Reported Coping Mechanisms among Households in Southeast Nigeria (2025)

Coping Mechanism	Frequency (%)	Common Locations	Typical Monthly Cost (₦)
Use of petrol/diesel generators	68	Aba, Onitsha, Enugu	35,000–48,000
Solar panels / lanterns	22	Awka, Afikpo, Nsukka	18,000–25,000 (initial)
Shared neighborhood charging centers	18	Umuahia, Okigwe, Ekwulobia	2,500–5,000
Candle / kerosene lamp reliance	34	Rural Ebonyi, Ihiala, Nnewi N.	3,000–4,500
Collective community fuel pooling	16	Abia, Imo	10,000–15,000 per family

Source: *Field Interviews, February–June 2025; compiled by author using NVivo thematic matrix)*

Table 3 showed that while most respondents identified energy insecurity as a major source of stress, the psychological dimension is often under-acknowledged. In Nsukka and Umuahia, students and artisans noted that frequent blackouts reduce motivation, fuel neighborhood tension, and heighten gendered burdens, as women shoulder most energy-related improvisations. NBS (2024) data support this, showing that 61% of energy-related household expenses in southern Nigeria are borne by women. Income elasticity analysis from respondents' estimates suggests that households spend between 23–28% of total monthly income on alternative energy. This exceeds the international affordability benchmark (10–15%), indicating a severe welfare squeeze (World Bank, 2024). These expenditures translate directly into reduced consumption of education, healthcare, and food confirming the poverty-energy nexus described by Sambo (2008) and Alita et al. (2023).

In Enugu and Anambra, where local solar firms are emerging, respondents described renewable adoption as desirable but unaffordable. “Solar is for the rich,” one interviewee in Nnewi observed, highlighting how green transition narratives have bypassed the poor. This finding echoes Rivera-Williams (2025), who argued that Africa's energy reforms often reproduce inequality under the guise of innovation. Energy insecurity in Southeast households is not merely an infrastructural failure it is a social condition that structures inequality and erodes everyday resilience. Families are forced to allocate scarce income to sustain a failing system, converting scarcity into a normalized cost of living.

Table 4 . Major Household Coping Mechanisms and Frequency of Adoption (n = 25 households)

Coping Mechanism	Frequency (%)	Notable Challenges
Purchase of petrol/diesel generator	88	High fuel costs, maintenance burden
Adoption of small solar systems	64	High initial cost, limited load capacity
Shared neighborhood generator	36	Coordination issues, irregular contributions
Battery/inverter system	28	Battery degradation, affordability limits
Total reliance on candle/kerosene	24	Health risk, poor illumination

Source: *Author's field dataset, February–June 2025*

The pattern in table 4 above illustrated how energy insecurity has intensified inequality within the region. In wealthier households, energy resilience is increasingly achieved through private investments in solar technology or diesel generators, while poorer families rely on kerosene lamps and communal power sharing. This privatization of energy survival reflects a "micro-level neoliberalism," where individuals rather than institutions bear the burden of public failure (Okafor, 2023). In Enugu metropolis, two female respondents noted that small business activities such as hairdressing and frozen food vending were now seasonal, depending on when electricity was available.

The broader implication is a silent erosion of human security. As domestic costs rise, disposable income falls, thereby shrinking local demand and affecting regional economies. The NVivo coding also revealed subtle gendered effects women disproportionately absorb domestic labor stress due to unreliable power for food preservation and home-based enterprises. This aligns with findings from Okechukwu and Iloh (2022), who observed that energy scarcity deepens unpaid care work burdens among women in southeastern households. Hence, the crisis of energy insecurity is not merely infrastructural but profoundly social and gendered.

Institutional and Political Dynamics

Institutional evidence from the field indicates that energy insecurity in the Southeast is politically sustained, not technically accidental. Interviews with ten energy officials across the five states three from local DISCO offices, two from Ministry of Power field units, and five local government administrators revealed an entrenched pattern of prebendal distribution. Officials in Abia and Anambra admitted that power supply prioritization is sometimes influenced by "economic importance" or "political consideration." In other words, areas housing political elites, state offices, or industrial clusters (such as Aba and Onitsha) receive preferential allocation, even when technical capacity exists to improve rural supply. As one DISCO engineer in Enugu (male, 42) put it:

"*You can't light everywhere; the allocation we get from the Transmission Company is political. We are told where to send bulk load, and we obey."*

This statement exemplifies how energy access is mediated by administrative discretion, not developmental equity. NVivo coding revealed three dominant institutional themes: (1) centralized control and interference, (2) regulatory ambiguity, and (3) rent-seeking within concession structures.

The evidence also gives practical meaning to Joseph's (1987) concept of prebendal politics. Rather than operating only through formal political appointments or access to public offices, prebendal practices in the energy sector appear through the selective control and distribution of public resources. The accounts from DISCO officials and other respondents suggest that decisions about where electricity is prioritised, how connections are facilitated, and who gains easier access to meters are not always guided by uniform service criteria. Political influence, personal connections, and economic status can shape access within a system already marked by limited supply. In this sense, private concessionaires and DISCO operators operate within, and sometimes reproduce, a wider institutional environment in which control over scarce public resources creates opportunities for influence and rent-seeking. The finding supports Joseph's argument that public resources can become instruments of patronage, while also showing how this logic is reproduced within a formally privatised electricity system.

Table 5. Reported Institutional and Political Constraints Identified by Energy Officials

Institutional Challenge	Frequency (%)	Illustrative Evidence (Interview Insight)
Federal over-centralization of grid allocation	74	"Transmission schedule comes from Abuja; we just distribute." – Enugu Official
Political interference in supply decisions	62	"Industrial clusters get more hours because of who owns them." – Abia Engineer
Rent-seeking in meter distribution and billing	58	"You can't get prepaid meters without a link." – SME Owner, Onitsha
Lack of maintenance funding / delayed contracts	66	"Funds for transformers take months to release." – Ebonyi LG Officer
Absence of regional power coordination	80	"No single Southeast grid management plan." – Imo DISCO staff

Source*: Field Interviews, February–June 2025; NVivo-coded institutional theme frequencies)*

Field records in table 5 also showed that several local government offices lack the technical autonomy to intervene in supply crises; bureaucratic requests for transformer repairs or line upgrades must pass through federal parastatals. This multi-layered bottleneck sustains what Motswaledi and Motloung (2025) describe as a hybrid paralysis, where both public and private actors share blame but none bear responsibility.

In the Southeast, the political dimensions of this paralysis are intensified by perceptions of federal neglect. Respondents in Ebonyi and Imo repeatedly linked their region's infrastructural decay to political marginalization. As one local council chairman in Afikpo stated: "We are part of the federation, but when it comes to energy, we are treated like an afterthought." This sentiment resonates with Raji's (2024) critique of fiscal federalism in Nigeria, where energy projects follow political geography rather than productivity metrics. Evidence from policy document reviews also confirms that state-level energy boards exist largely in name. Between 2022–2024, no dedicated state renewable plan was implemented in Abia or Ebonyi, while Anambra's "Light Up Initiative" (2023) remains underfunded and donor-dependent. This reflects what Ake (1996) called the "illusion of development" where policy visibility masks structural inaction. The institutional analysis affirms the neo-dependency thesis: scarcity is reproduced because it sustains patronage. Electricity, far from being a neutral commodity, functions as a political instrument allocated to consolidate loyalty, ration access, and sustain federal leverage.

Regional Inequality, Theoretical Synthesis, and Policy Implications

The persistence of energy insecurity in Southeast Nigeria underscores a deeper crisis of structural inequality within the Nigerian federation. Empirical findings from households, small-scale manufacturers, and local officials across Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Imo reveal a pattern that extends beyond technical deficiencies. Respondents repeatedly situated the problem within the architecture of political exclusion, fiscal centralization, and elite capture of federal energy agencies. More than 73% of participants described electricity shortages as a form of "federal punishment," especially when contrasted with the relatively stable supply to Abuja and parts of the Southwest (Field Interview, 2025). Such sentiments illustrate that energy deprivation functions not merely as infrastructural neglect but as a political instrument reinforcing regional hierarchy.

From the standpoint of the Political Economy of Energy, this pattern demonstrates how energy infrastructures serve as both material and symbolic instruments of governance. Ake's (1996) political economy thesis emphasized that African development crises stem from the politicization of production and distribution. In this context, energy scarcity becomes a product of the same logic: it sustains networks of rent-seeking and bureaucratic monopoly rather than public welfare. Similarly, Watts (2004) argues that infrastructures of scarcity such as oil pipelines or electric grids are means of consolidating authority and extracting compliance from subnational regions. In the Southeast, the federal government's control over generation licenses, gas distribution channels, and tariff approvals exemplifies this dynamic, making regional development contingent on political loyalty rather than efficiency.

However, the Neo-Dependency Theory expands the analysis by exposing the internalization of dependency. Scholars such as Amin (1976), Beckman (1981), and Omeje (2016) show that postcolonial states reproduce colonial asymmetries through domestic intermediaries. Nigeria's federal structure has entrenched this logic by creating a "gatekeeper state" (Raji, 2024), where

access to energy projects, subsidies, and capital flows is mediated by political elites rather than market forces or regional needs. Data from interviews with local SME operators in Nnewi and Aba revealed a recurrent pattern of informal electricity payments to local officials and private contractors an adaptive strategy that mirrors what Beckman (1981) calls "internalized dependency." The Southeast thus occupies a peripheral position not because of distance from the national grid, but because of its peripheral status in the political economy of allocation.

Bringing both frameworks into dialogue allows a deeper understanding of the *politics of deprivation*. The political economy perspective explains the *how* the concrete mechanisms through which the state and allied elites reproduce scarcity while neo-dependency theory explains the *why* the historical and structural reasons the Southeast remains marginalized despite contributing significantly to national revenue. Together, they reveal that the region's energy insecurity is neither accidental nor purely infrastructural; it is structurally embedded in Nigeria's political economy of rent and control. As one Enugu-based official remarked during the interviews, "Electricity follows politics; the cables do not lie, but the power that flows through them is political" (Field Interview, 2025).

This synthesis points to critical policy implications. First, any strategy for energy reform in Nigeria must transcend technical upgrades and address *institutional redesign*. Decentralization of energy governance allowing states to generate and distribute power autonomously remains the most viable path to sustainable electrification. This aligns with the Electricity Act (2023), which for the first time legally empowers states to operate independent grids. However, implementation requires fiscal devolution and the dismantling of federal monopolies that have historically constrained regional initiatives. Second, investment in renewable and off-grid energy systems in the Southeast should be paired with institutional safeguards against elite capture. Without transparency mechanisms and community-level oversight, decentralization risks reproducing the same dependency dynamics at subnational levels.

Third, the findings demand a recalibration of Nigeria's development planning philosophy. Federal ministries and development partners must incorporate regional equity benchmarks into national energy strategies. This entails equitable distribution of capital budgets, inclusion of regional expertise in national energy boards, and incentives for private-sector-led innovation in underserved regions. The adoption of a "region-sensitive energy index," for instance, could serve as a metric for assessing progress beyond aggregate megawatt statistics. Finally, community-driven energy cooperatives and SME clusters, such as those evolving in Aba and Nnewi, should be institutionalized as legitimate actors in the energy market a shift that redefines the politics of energy from state monopoly to participatory governance.

The findings showed that energy insecurity in Southeast Nigeria is sustained by the interaction of centralized decision-making, institutional weakness, and unequal access to public resources. The evidence from households, businesses, and energy officials therefore points to a problem that cannot be resolved through infrastructure expansion alone. It requires changes in the way energy resources are governed, allocated, and made accountable to the communities they are intended to serve. The discussion now turns to the broader conclusion drawn from these findings

and to the measures required to address the structural conditions that reproduce energy insecurity in the region.

Conclusion

This study examined the effects of energy insecurity on productivity, employment, and household welfare in Southeast Nigeria, as well as the political and institutional factors that sustain the problem. The findings showed that persistent power outages have reduced business productivity, increased the cost of private power generation, limited employment opportunities, and placed additional pressure on household income and welfare. The study also found that these effects are reinforced by centralized energy governance, political interference, regulatory weaknesses, and rent-seeking. The study therefore concludes that energy insecurity in Southeast Nigeria is not merely a technical problem but also a political and institutional one. Greater decentralization of energy governance, including state-level generation, renewable energy, and community-based solutions, can reduce the region's dependence on an unreliable centralized system. However, such decentralization must be supported by transparency and accountability to prevent the reproduction of existing patterns of political control and unequal access.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

1. State governments should support reliable electricity supply for major industrial and commercial clusters through decentralized generation, renewable energy, and mini-grid projects to reduce the high cost of private power generation.
2. Energy policies should prioritise SMEs and productive enterprises, particularly in major commercial centres, by improving access to affordable and reliable electricity needed for business expansion and job creation.
3. Investment in community-based and off-grid renewable energy should be expanded in underserved communities to reduce household dependence on expensive generators and other costly alternatives.
4. Energy governance should be more transparent and decentralized, with stronger oversight of electricity allocation, metering, contracts, and investment to reduce political interference, rent-seeking, and unequal access.

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