



Assessment of the Rebuilding of Rail Infrastructure in Nigeria: A Literature Review Approach

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Abstract

Rail transportation provides a major advantage to Nigeria's socio-economic activities as it can move substantial quantities of cargo and carry many passengers. Nonetheless, trade and socio-economic unity have been significantly affected as road transport continues to dominate overland transport. The renewal of the rail system for economic recovery has significantly declined since the 1970s. This study analyses the evaluation of the reconstruction of rail infrastructure in Nigeria. The approach involves a longitudinal research framework extending over 26 years, from 1997 through 2022. A line graph was employed in the analysis of the data. The outcome indicates that funding for the Nigeria Railway Corporation (NRC) from the late 1990s to 2022 exhibited a pattern of prolonged neglect, followed by a significant, debt-driven overhaul. Thus, increased investment and improved management are still necessary.

Keywords: Rail infrastructure, socio-economic activities, NRC, road transport

1.0 Introduction

The renewal of railway infrastructure has become a key element in the conversation about sustainable development and economic change throughout Africa. In Nigeria, a country facing the twin issues of a rising population and an overburdened transportation network, the ambitious initiative to revamp its railway system is critically significant. For many years after the colonial-era railways fell into disuse, the Nigerian railway network was marked by ineffectiveness, disregard, and almost complete obsolescence, resulting in a heavy dependence on road transport, which brought about congestion, elevated costs, and safety issues (Adeniji, 2021). In reply, the Nigerian government, mainly via the traditional Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC), has initiated a large-scale renovation initiative, promoting contemporary standard-gauge tracks to link key economic centres and foster socio-economic cohesion.

This co-ordinated initiative for rail renewal goes beyond just infrastructure improvements; it represents a tactical move to unleash substantial economic opportunities, boost regional interconnectivity, and offer a secure, cost-effective, and efficient mass transit solution (Oluwadele & Lawal, 2022). Initiatives like the Abuja-Kaduna, Lagos-Ibadan, and the active Port Harcourt-Maiduguri lines signify major achievements in this reconstruction plan. Nonetheless, this ambitious project is laden with complexities, involving various challenges that include funding and financing frameworks, public-private collaborations, technology transfer, as well as socio-environmental effects and institutional governance within the NRC (Eze et al., 2023a).

Thus, an essential evaluation of this reconstruction process is necessary to measure its efficiency, sustainability, and overall effects. This article aims to deliver a thorough assessment of the current initiatives to restore Nigeria's rail system, focusing on the Nigeria Railway Corporation as a primary case study. It will explore the factors, advancements, and effects of the modernization initiatives, while also thoroughly assessing the ongoing and new challenges.

This research seeks to enhance the policy discussion regarding transport infrastructure in Nigeria by amalgamating recent advancements and practical findings, along with suggestions for a cohesive and sustainable rail system that effectively meets the country's requirements.

2.0 Literature Review

This literature review consolidates current academic and non-academic sources on the restoration of Nigeria's railway infrastructure, focusing on the NRC as a primary case study. It examines the historical backdrop of the decline, the factors and approaches for rejuvenation, the main initiatives carried out, and the complex challenges and possibilities that characterise this bold national endeavour.

2.1 Historical Context and the Era of Decay

A thorough comprehension of the factors leading to the failure of the previous rail system is essential for grasping the magnitude of the restoration endeavour. Researchers consistently identify a blend of elements. Ogbojafor et al. (2020) point to "years of neglect, insufficient funding, and inadequate management" as the main offenders. The narrow-gauge railways from the colonial period, mostly remaining the same since they were created, grew more and more inefficient and expensive to maintain. Adebayo and Ojo (2021) state that after the civil war, there was a shift in policy favouring road transportation, resulting in a consistent redirection of resources away from railways. This disregard led to deteriorating tracks, outdated rolling stock, and regular malfunctions, undermining public trust and the NRC's income source. The research by Dauda and Sule (2019) emphasizes that this decline had significant socio-economic impacts, such as the seclusion of farming communities and heightened stress on transportation systems, resulting in increased prices of goods and road upkeep.

2.1.1 Distribution of the railway network in the Nigerian states

Nigeria's railway network has progressed through various historical stages, starting from its colonial beginnings to a phase of deterioration and, in recent times, significant modernization initiatives. Table 1 provides a comprehensive summary of Nigeria's railway network from its inception in 1898 to the crucial year of 2016.

Table 1: Nigeria's railway system network in its historical period

No	Year	Segment	Gauge Type	Distance
1.	1898-1901	Lagos – Ibadan	Narrow	193
2.	1901-1909	Ibadan – Jebba	Narrow	295
3.	1907-1911	Kano – Baro	Narrow	562
4.	1909-1915	Jebba – Minna	Narrow	255
5.	1914-1916	Port Harcourt – Enugu	Narrow	243
6.	1916-1924	Enugu – Markurdi	Narrow	220
7.	1922-1927	Kaduna – Kafancha	Narrow	179
8.	1922-1927	Kafancha – Bukuru	Narrow	101
9.	1958-1961	Bukuru – Bauchi	Narrow	238
10.	1961-1963	Bauchi – Gombe	Narrow	166
11.	1963-1964	Gombe – Maiguduri	Narrow	302
12.	1990-2003	Itakpe – Ajaokuta– Warri	Standard	287
13.	2011-2016	Port Harcourt – Onne (Under Construction)	Standard	330
14.	2011-2016	Kaduna – Abuja (Completed)	Standard	457
		Total Distance (Kilometres)		3,828

Source: Abioye, 2016; Author's compilation from NBS, 2017

Between 1898 and 1960, the British colonial government constructed and expanded the network mainly to transport raw materials from the interior to coastal ports. From 1898 to 1912, the initial railway line was constructed from Lagos to Ibadan (193 km). It arrived in Ibadan in 1901. This route was lengthened to the north toward Jebba and Minna, connecting with the Baro-Kano line (built between 1907 and 1911) from the Niger River port of Baro. In 1912, the Lagos and Northern networks were combined to form the Nigerian Government Railway (NGR). Construction of the Eastern line from Port Harcourt to the Enugu coal fields began in 1913 and extended to Makurdi and Kaduna by 1927, forming a rudimentary network.

Upon gaining independence in 1960, the Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC), formed by the NRC Act of 1955, assumed control of the nearly 3,000 km rail network. During this time, the network achieved its highest operational performance. Additionally, significant projects encompassed the building of the 645 km Kano-Maiduguri line (finished in 1964) and the 569 km Port Harcourt-Maiduguri line (connecting the east and north, finished in 1964). By 1964, the network attained its peak colonial-era length of more than 4,500 route-km.

In the period known as Severe Decline, specifically from the mid-1970s to 2005, the arrival of oil wealth and a resultant change in national transportation policy resulted in devastating neglect. This resulted in significant investment in road systems (often constructed alongside railways), inadequate management, continual underfunding of rail resources, and outdated rolling stock, causing a decline in service quality and dependability. The initial revival and modernisation initiatives (2006–2016) signify the start of substantial endeavours to rejuvenate and update the system, reaching a significant milestone in 2016.

The different railways spanning the region of Nigeria are illustrated in Figure 1 below. The country's railway system has several shortcomings. Just two of five seaports have rail access, and none of the airports are linked to the national railway network. Moreover, nearly half of the 36 states in the nation lack any railways, and the distribution of the network is highly imbalanced (NRC, 2006). For instance, approximately fifty percent of the overall rail length is found in just five states. The suggestion is that the country depends exclusively on road transportation for the movement of people, goods, and services. The significant fuel usage and resources allocated to barely noticeable road infrastructure often hinder economic growth.

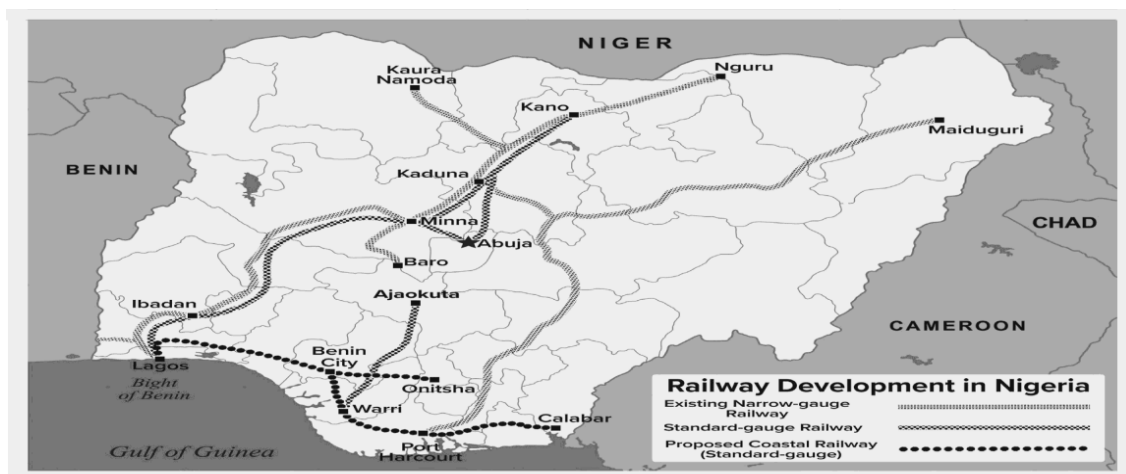


Figure 1: Nigeria Railway Network Distribution.

Source: Chen, 2018

2.2 The Drive for Rebuilding: Policy Shifts and Strategic Frameworks

The renewal of the railway system is not a singular occurrence but rather a component of a wider national development plan. The Nigeria Vision 20:2020 document and its follow-up, the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) 2017-2020, clearly identified transportation infrastructure, especially railways, as a crucial facilitator for economic diversification and development (National Planning Commission, 2017). The main principle, as highlighted by Nwokocha and Umoren (2022), is to lower logistics costs, link important economic areas (such as ports, mines, and agricultural centres), and create a secure, inexpensive, and effective option for transporting people and products.

A major change in strategy has been the transition from public-sector exclusivity to the involvement of the private sector and foreign investment. The government, via the NRC, has mainly embraced a framework of concessional agreements and direct contracts with international companies, particularly from China. Eze et al. (2023b) examine how this model offers essential funding and technical knowledge but also brings up concerns regarding debt sustainability and the transfer of technology.

2.3 Key Rebuilding Projects and the Modernisation Agenda

The literature highlights multiple significant projects that form the foundation of the reconstruction initiative, which can be divided into two concurrent paths: upgrading to standard gauge and restoring the current narrow-gauge system.

2.3.1 Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) Projects:

Abuja-Kaduna Rail Line: In operation since 2016, this was the initial significant SGR initiative. Research conducted by Adewole and Raheem (2021) has recorded its notable effect on minimizing travel duration and enhancing interstate trade and property development along its route. It has turned into an essential transport connection, particularly during times of instability on the nearby highway.

Lagos-Ibadan Rail Line: Launched in 2021, this is a flagship initiative linking the country's economic centre to a significant inland city. Ogunbodede and Adebisi (2022) examine its function in alleviating congestion at the Apapa ports and its significant capacity for promoting economic initiatives in the South-West area.

Itakpe-Ajaokuta-Warri Line: This initiative, initially designed for transporting steel, was finalized and launched for both passenger and cargo operations, serving as an essential connection for the solid mineral industry (Jerome et al., 2021).

Current Coastal and Eastern Lines: The bold Lagos-Calabar coastal route and the Port Harcourt-Maiduguri eastern route are at different phases of planning and implementation, showcasing the most extensive part of the SGR network.

2.3.2 Narrow Gauge Rehabilitation:

Acknowledging the necessity for a step-by-step strategy, the government initiated the restoration of the old narrow-gauge system. The agreement for the restoration of the Port Harcourt-Maiduguri railway, granted in 2021, serves as a notable illustration. Chineme (2022) states that this strategy is economical for restoring links to the eastern and north-eastern regions

of the nation in the immediate future, while the long-term objective continues to be transitioning to standard gauge.

2.4 Rail Infrastructural Investment in Nigeria

The railway sector in Nigeria is as old as the colonial period. It played a crucial role in the movement of goods and people during the colonial period. The narrow-gauge line that linked the north to the south was mainly to meet the transportation needs of the colonial masters for moving raw materials, agricultural products, and other mineral resources for their growing industries (Chen, 2018). Mismanagement, corruption, and a downturn in agriculture after the discovery of oil led to its collapse (Aliyu et al., 2021). The transport infrastructure in Nigeria is highly underdeveloped, which leads to high transport costs and low competitiveness of its products in both the local and international markets (Ojedokun et al., 2022).

In 2002, after some decades of neglect, the government under the leadership of former president Olusegun Obasanjo launched a twenty-five-year development plan to partner with China to revive the rail network for overall economic development (Chen, 2018). To achieve that, the government sought the collaboration of foreign investors such as the African Development Bank, Julius Berger, and the Chinese construction firms, which are involved in multiple infrastructural projects across the country. A Chinese civil engineering and construction company was awarded the project (CCECC) under the new concession arrangement (Babatunde, 2020). Accordingly, below is the map of Nigeria showing the proposed rail networks (i.e., track line) linking different centres across the country under the new agreement.



Figure 2: A Modern Coach on Newly Constructed Rail Infrastructure in Nigeria
Source: Trending Tags (2025).

The above Figure 2 illustrates a lateral view of a contemporary coach on recently built rail infrastructure in Nigeria. Izuaka (2021) states that Nigeria's rail transport sector earns 1.1 billion Naira over three months, highlighting its potential impact on the Nigerian economy.

2.5 Theoretical Underpinnings in the Rebuilding of Rail Infrastructure in Nigeria

This literature review consolidates academic research on the revitalisation of Nigeria's railway system by analysing it through the perspectives of various significant theories: Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) and Neoliberal Theory, Institutional Theory, the Large Technical Systems (LTS) framework, and Dependency Theory. These theories offer a comprehensive insight into the factors, dynamics, challenges, and consequences of this large-scale infrastructure project.

2.5.1 Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) and Neoliberal Theory

A key theoretical perspective used for Nigeria's rail reconstruction is that of PPPs, positioned within a wider neoliberal policy context. This theory supports minimising the government's direct involvement in delivering services and utilising private sector funding, effectiveness, and knowledge (Opara & Nwagwu, 2022). The Nigerian government's transition from depending exclusively on public financing to concessional deals and direct contracts with international companies, especially Chinese firms like China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), exemplifies this model perfectly.

In its utility, researchers such as Eze et al. (2023b) employ this framework to examine the funding models of the Lagos-Ibadan and Abuja-Kaduna Standard Gauge Railways (SGRs). They claim that this method has hastened project completion, which would have been delayed by public financial limitations. Nonetheless, the theory also exposes considerable conflicts. Okoro and Nwankwo (2023) analyze neoliberal theory, emphasizing the dangers of "debt-trap diplomacy" and the possible relinquishment of control over strategic national assets to foreign powers. The discussion focuses on whether the benefits of increased efficiency surpass the risks of long-term sovereign debt and dependence.

2.5.2 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory emphasizes the formal and informal "rules of the game"—the laws, norms, and cognitive frameworks that influence organizational behaviour (North, 1990). When applied to the NRC, this theory illustrates how the remnants of institutional decline affect the process of reconstruction.

Suleiman and Bello's (2022) research uses institutional theory to analyse the NRC's historical issues, such as bureaucratic inertia, political interference, and a poor maintenance culture. They argue that merely adding new infrastructure to an unchanged institutional framework leads to future deterioration. The theory highlights the necessity for supportive institutional changes, including a revamp of corporate governance and management based on performance, to guarantee the sustainability of the new assets.

Moreover, the implementation of global standards (e.g., standard gauge) and purchasing methods can be viewed as "coercive isomorphism," in which the NRC aligns with influences from international creditors and collaborators (Adebayo & Ojo, 2021).

2.5.3 Large Technical Systems (LTS) Framework

Innovated by Thomas Hughes, the LTS framework perceives infrastructures such as railways not just as tangible objects but as intricate socio-technical systems that consist of physical networks, technological elements, and a network of organisations, scientific groups, and legislative materials (Hughes, 1987).

The reconstruction of the Nigerian railway exemplifies "system reversal" and "momentum" creation. Nwokocha and Umoren (2022) implicitly apply this perspective by examining the railway not in a vacuum but as a system designed to counter years of disregard. They investigate how the new lines are structured to reconnect with various systems—ports (Apapa), agriculture (agro-processing zones), and urban transit—thus generating a fresh "technological momentum."

The LTS viewpoint emphasises the reliance of parts on one another. The malfunction of a single component (e.g., insufficient security protocols) can cause a systemic collapse, evident in the assaults on the Abuja-Kaduna route (Ikeanyibe & Ezeah, 2023). This theory posits that achievement relies on the concurrent advancement of every system element: tracks, rolling stock, trained staff, security measures, and pricing frameworks.

2.5.4 Dependency Theory and (Neo-) Colonialism

Dependency Theory is frequently used on a larger global level, providing a critical perspective for examining the power dynamics between the North and South in infrastructure development. It asserts that resources transfer from a "periphery" of impoverished nations to a "core" of affluent ones, benefiting the latter while disadvantaging the former.

Critical researchers utilize this framework to interrogate the characteristics of the partnership with China. Jerome (2021) raises the question of whether the rail initiatives, financed by Chinese loans and constructed by Chinese companies employing imported Chinese resources and workforce, genuinely contribute to Nigeria's long-term industrial growth or simply establish a new type of dependency. This theory challenges the level of local content and technology transfer, suggesting that the reconstruction might strengthen a neo-colonial economic framework in which Nigeria continues to serve as a supplier of raw materials and a consumer of foreign capital goods.

3.0 Methodology

Employing the ex-post facto research approach, the study utilises a detailed dataset covering the period from 1997 to 2022. Data on Investment (INV) is obtained from the Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC, 2022). The gathered data experiences extensive pre-processing to guarantee precision and uniformity. This includes dealing with absent values, managing anomalies, and transforming variables into a uniform format. Time series data is arranged in chronological order to enable significant analysis. Because the data is comprised of a time series, line graphs were used in the analysis. This method was deemed effective for representing time series data, as it facilitates the straightforward recognition of trends and patterns over time. The data from the study are shown in Table 1. The selection of the study timeframe is guided by the availability of data. To guarantee a dependable outcome, the researcher limited her data to US Dollars to avoid larger variations in the local currency (Naira).

Table 1: Annual Data on Investment in Railway Infrastructure in Nigeria over the period of 1997 to 2022.

Year	Investment (\$)
1997	32,000
1998	88,000

1999	528,000
2000	52,220
2001	840,000
2002	8,300,000
2003	81,300
2004	1,490,000
2005	41,019,200
2006	25,100,000
2007	25,235,993
2008	28,414,706
2009	31,593,419
2010	34,772,132
2011	37,950,845
2012	41,129,558
2013	44,308,271
2014	47,486,984
2015	50,665,697
2016	53,844,410
2017	57,023,123
2018	60,201,836
2019	63,380,549
2020	66,559,262
2021	69,737,975
2022	72,916,688

Source: NRC (2022)

To examine the rebuilding of rail infrastructure, a key development objective for the government, a case study of the Nigeria Railway Corporation, line graph analysis was employed to show the magnitude of investment in rail infrastructure in Nigeria over a period of twenty-six years.

4.0 Results

4.1 Line Graph Results

The results of the line graph, which indicate the magnitude of investment in the Nigeria Railway Corporation from 1917 to 2022 is presented in Figure 3.

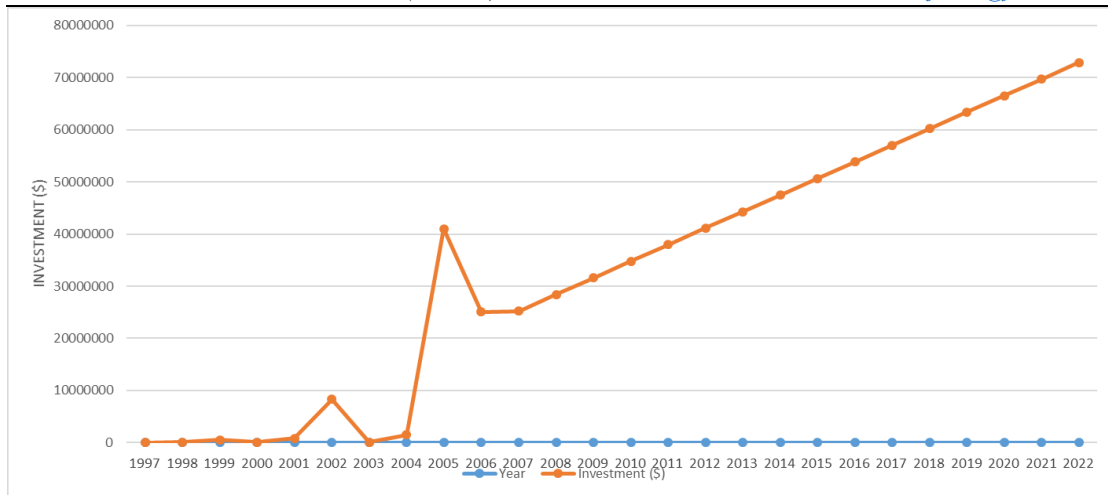


Figure 3: Rate of investment in NRC from 1997 - 2022

Source: Authors’ computation, 2025

The findings indicate that investment in the Nigeria Railway Corporation (NRC) from the late 1990s to 2022 exhibited a trend of extended disregard, succeeded by a significant, debt-financed overhaul. The transition started around 2009 with rehabilitation initiatives and picked up speed after 2015 due to substantial Chinese loans for new standard-gauge railways. Investment in the Nigeria Railway Corporation (NRC) from 1997 to 2022 can be generally categorized into three specific phases: a period of neglect, a phase of partial revival, and a significant transformation fuelled by external (mainly Chinese) financing.

4.1.1 Era of Neglect (Late 1990s – 2009)

Following years of reduction, the NRC obtained scant government support during this time frame. The network declined significantly, with no new major routes established and existing facilities becoming dilapidated due to a persistent shortage of funding. The company announced bankruptcy as early as 1988, and the circumstances continued into the 1990s and early 2000s.

4.1.2 Partial Resuscitation (2009 – 2015)

A change commenced in 2009 with a project to revive the current narrow-gauge system, financed through a combination of government funding and Chinese agreements. Consequently, the eastern line from Port Harcourt to Maiduguri was renewed for US\$427 million. Additionally, a contract worth US\$1.49 billion was signed with China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) to restore the 1,244 km narrow gauge railway, but progress was sluggish and the project was never finished.

4.1.3 Transformation Era (2015 – 2022)

President Muhammadu Buhari's administration initiated a significant modernisation campaign, primarily funded through loans from China's Exim Bank.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

Between 1997 and 2022, Nigeria's railway investment evolved from almost non-existent to one of the largest sectors in infrastructure spending, shifting from governmental neglect to a modernisation initiative funded by China. From 2007 to 2022, heightened investment in Nigeria's rail infrastructure was directly associated with the growth and modernisation of the rail network, greatly enhancing its mileage and connectivity nationwide. As of 2022, Nigeria's railway network length had expanded considerably since 2007. For instance, the standard gauge network grew from almost none in 2007 to more than 1,000 kilometres by 2022. Additionally, the restoration of narrow-gauge tracks contributed to the overall distance, enhancing access to areas such as the Niger Delta and northern Nigeria

This result aligns with the findings of Ogbojafor et al. (2020), who point out "years of neglect, insufficient funding, and poor management" as the main factors. Additionally, Adeniji (2021) asserts that the Nigerian government, mainly via the historic Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC), has initiated an extensive reconstruction initiative, promoting modern standard-gauge railways to link key commercial centres and encourage socio-economic cohesion.

5.0 Conclusion

The research evaluates the restoration of rail infrastructure in Nigeria by utilising time series data from 1997 to 2022. This results from a significant allocation of resources by the government to revive the sector. The findings indicate that rail transportation boosts economic development, aligning with the theories. It can also be concluded that the long-term neglect of the rail transport sub-sector is detrimental to the economy's infrastructural development. The line graph indicates that investment in the Nigeria Railway Corporation (NRC) from the late 1990s to 2022 demonstrated a trend of extended disregard, succeeded by a significant transformation financed through debt. The findings show that the transition started approximately in 2009 with rehabilitation initiatives and gained momentum post-2015 with substantial Chinese financing for new standard-gauge railways. In conclusion, the government must implement development policies focused on bolstering the economic sub-sector to enable it to function at its full potential and counteract the deterioration currently present in that area.

By and large, the rail industry requires bolder track development and investment to operate efficiently and expand throughout the country. It is advised that the government adopt a plan that promotes substantial investment in every facet of the Nigerian rail industry.

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