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Journal of Entrepreneurship and Global Economic Leadership

ISSN-3143-8822

Research Article

Social Mobility and Structural Inequality in Cross River State: Achievement, Ascription and the Crisis of Opportunity

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Received date: 10 Sep 2025: Accepted date: 24 Sep 2025: Published date: 01 Oct 2025

Citation: Adalikwu R.A (2025). "Social Mobility and Structural Inequality in Cross River State: Achievement, Ascription and the Crisis of Opportunity" *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Global Economic Leadership*, 1(2):109.

Abstract

Social mobility is the movement of individuals and groups within a system of social stratification. It is a key indicator of how open or closed a society is. In Cross River State, the social structure has historically provided avenues for upward mobility through the civil service, trade, agriculture, and communal networks. However, contemporary socio-economic realities point to a breakdown in these mobility channels. This study sociologically examines social mobility in Cross River State. Guided by Structural Functionalism and Conflict Theory, and utilizing concepts of class, status, role, achievement, ascription, and social closure, the paper investigates whether the state still offers legitimate pathways to success or if mobility has been replaced by a cycle of unemployment and inequality. Findings reveal a shift from achievement-based mobility to ascription-based mobility. Structural constraints, including deindustrialization, overdependence on government employment, political patronage, and the absence of a strong private sector, have limited opportunity structures for the majority. Consequently, many youths experience status inconsistency, downward mobility, and anomie. At the same time, the elite maintain their position through social closure, cultural capital, and intergenerational transfer of privilege, thereby reproducing inequality. The study concludes that Cross River State is experiencing restricted and blocked mobility. For social reintegration to occur, there must be deliberate restructuring of institutions to expand opportunity, promote meritocracy, and reduce class-based inequality. Without this, mobility will remain a privilege rather than a right.

Keywords: Social Mobility, Structural Inequality, Achievement, Ascription, Crisis of Opportunity.

Background to the Study

Social mobility describes the movement of individuals and groups between positions within a system of social stratification. It reflects how open a society is and the extent to which life chances are determined

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Journal of Entrepreneurship and Global Economic Leadership
ISSN-3143-8822

by merit rather than by birth. In societies with high mobility, education, skills, and hard work translate into improved income, prestige, and power. In societies with low mobility, ascriptive factors such as family background, ethnicity, and political connections determine outcomes. This makes social mobility a central indicator of structural inequality and institutional legitimacy. The issue has also gained global relevance through the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 10, which emphasizes the need to reduce inequalities and expand opportunity for all. When mobility channels are open, societies benefit from higher productivity, innovation, and cohesion. When they are blocked, the result is talent wastage, frustration, and instability [1,2].

Cross River State in Nigeria's South-South zone historically provided several avenues for upward movement. During the colonial and early post-independence periods, Calabar served as an administrative capital. This gave the state early access to Western education, missionary institutions, and civil service employment. A professional class of teachers, nurses, clerks, and administrators emerged, many of whom rose through personal achievement rather than lineage. Alongside the civil service, agriculture, fishing, and trade offered alternative routes to advancement. The hinterland areas of Ikom, Ogoja, and Obudu engaged in cocoa and palm produce farming, while riverine communities depended on fishing and maritime commerce. Communal and kinship networks also provided credit, apprenticeship, and social support that enabled individuals without elite backgrounds to accumulate resources and improve their status [3].

However, the last two decades have witnessed structural changes that have weakened these traditional channels. At the national level, Nigeria has experienced deindustrialization, public sector retrenchment, and increasing dependence on oil revenue and federal allocations. For Cross River State, these challenges were compounded by specific shocks. The ceding of the Bakassi Peninsula in 2008 displaced thousands of fisherfolk and traders and removed a major source of livelihood and internally generated revenue. The subsequent loss of oil-well status further reduced federal allocations and limited the capital available for development projects. These events narrowed the state's economic base and increased reliance on government spending [4].

As a result, the state economy became heavily dependent on public sector wages, political appointments, and government contracts. With a weak private sector and limited industrialization, access to economic security became concentrated in the public sphere. Studies on Nigerian state governance show that where the private sector is weak, opportunity becomes scarce and access is mediated by patronage, ethnicity, and political loyalty rather than by qualification. Recruitment and advancement increasingly follow the logic of "*who you know*" instead of "*what you know*." This has reduced the role of merit and expanded the influence of political godfatherism in determining who gets jobs, contracts, and appointments [5].

This context points to a fundamental shift in the nature of mobility in the state. Sociologists distinguish between achievement-based mobility, which is attained through education and effort, and

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ascription-based mobility, which is assigned by birth and connections. In Cross River State, there is growing evidence that ascription has replaced achievement as the dominant mode of mobility. Elite families reproduce advantage through exclusive schools, overseas education, and strategic social networks. Political elites control nominations and appointments and use them to reward loyalists and family members. Cultural capital such as language, mannerisms, and access to elite circles also functions as a gatekeeping mechanism. The outcome is the intergenerational transfer of privilege. Children born into elite households inherit both material resources and access to decision-makers, while children from poor households face structural barriers regardless of talent or academic performance [1].

A major contradiction in the current structure is the mismatch between educational expansion and economic opportunity. Universities and polytechnics in Cross River State graduate thousands of students every year in diverse fields. Yet the economy lacks the capacity to absorb them. The public sector is saturated and has been on a hiring freeze, while the private sector is dominated by trading and services that offer low wages and limited career growth. This has produced a large class of educated but unemployed youth. For this group, education no longer guarantees mobility. Instead, it creates status inconsistency, where individuals have high credentials but low income and low social prestige. Research in Nigeria shows that such status inconsistency contributes to anomie, outward migration, and engagement in informal or illicit economic activities. In Cross River, outward migration, commonly called "*japa*," to Lagos, Abuja, and abroad has become a primary strategy for seeking opportunity. Those who remain often turn to the informal sector, while some become vulnerable to cybercrime and cult-related activities as alternative routes to income [6].

While the majority experience blocked mobility, a small elite continues to maintain and expand its position. This elite controls political office, access to government resources, and major businesses. Through social closure, they limit competition for lucrative positions. Through policy influence, they shape institutions to protect their interests. Through intergenerational transfer, they ensure their children begin with advantages that others cannot access. This process reproduces structural inequality. Inequality is not limited to income gaps. It also involves unequal access to quality education, healthcare, justice, and political voice. When institutions are captured by a few, public policies tend to favor the already privileged and further narrow opportunity for the majority. Over time, this entrenches class divisions and weakens social cohesion [2].

Despite these realities, there is limited empirical research on how these national trends manifest specifically in Cross River State. Most studies on inequality and mobility in Nigeria focus on Lagos, Abuja, and the oil-producing states of the Niger Delta. Cross River has received less attention, even though it has experienced unique shocks such as territorial loss and a sharp decline in federal allocation. Without state-level evidence, it is difficult to design policies that address the specific constraints to mobility in the state [3,4].

The central problem this study addresses is whether Cross River State still offers legitimate, achievement-

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based pathways to success, or whether mobility has been replaced by unemployment, political patronage, and inherited privilege. The breakdown of traditional mobility channels, the saturation of the public sector, and the dominance of ascriptive criteria suggest that the state is experiencing restricted and blocked mobility. This has serious implications for youth development, social integration, and long-term stability. Examining these patterns is necessary to identify where institutions have failed, how opportunity is distributed, and what reforms are needed to restore meritocracy and expand access.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Social mobility remains one of the most important concepts in sociology because it addresses fundamental questions about fairness, opportunity, and development. It refers to the movement of individuals and groups between different positions in a hierarchy of social stratification. The level of mobility in a society indicates how open that society is and the extent to which a person's life chances are determined by personal effort, education, and talent rather than by birth, family background, or political connections. Societies with high levels of mobility are generally characterised by greater economic productivity, innovation, and social cohesion.

In contrast, societies with low mobility often experience widespread frustration, talent wastage, and the reproduction of inequality across generations [7]. At the global level, recent scholarship has drawn attention to the decline of mobility in many low- and middle-income countries. This decline is attributed to a combination of weak institutions, economic shocks, and the increasing concentration of opportunity in the hands of a few.

The United Nations Development Programme (2023) notes that in Sub-Saharan Africa, intergenerational mobility is severely constrained by unequal access to quality education, healthcare, and formal employment. In contexts where public services are poorly funded and the private sector is underdeveloped, family background becomes the most important predictor of a person's adult outcomes. This creates a cycle in which poverty and privilege are both transmitted from parents to children. The report emphasizes that without deliberate policy to expand access to basic services and economic opportunities, many African economies will continue to underutilize their human capital and will struggle to achieve sustainable development.

Within Nigeria, the literature on social mobility has focused on several key themes. The first is the role of the state and the influence of patronage politics. Research on public administration in Nigeria shows that access to government employment and resources is often mediated by political affiliation, ethnic identity, and personal connections. The civil service, which was once regarded as a major channel of upward mobility, has become saturated and competitive. Recruitment and promotion are frequently influenced by informal networks rather than by qualification and performance. This has weakened the capacity of the state to serve as a meritocratic institution and has turned public sector jobs into scarce resources distributed as political rewards. The consequence is that for many Nigerians,

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upward movement now depends more on who one knows than on what one knows [8].

The second major theme in Nigerian literature is the relationship between education and the labour market. Over the last two decades, Nigeria has witnessed a rapid expansion in tertiary education. The number of universities, polytechnics, and colleges has increased, and enrollment rates have grown significantly. However, this expansion has not been matched by a corresponding growth in employment opportunities. Studies on youth transitions in Nigeria reveal that many graduates spend several years searching for jobs or accept employment that is far below their level of qualification. This creates a situation of status inconsistency, where individuals have high educational credentials but low income and low occupational prestige. The result is economic vulnerability, social frustration, and in many cases, outward migration to other parts of Nigeria or abroad in search of better opportunities. The implication is that education can only function as a channel of mobility when it is linked to a productive economy that can absorb graduates [9].

The third theme concerns regional variation in mobility and livelihood opportunities. Nigeria's regions differ significantly in terms of economic structure, resource endowment, and exposure to shocks. In the South-South zone, research has highlighted the impact of environmental degradation, loss of agricultural land, and changes in federal revenue allocation on local livelihoods. Many communities that previously depended on farming, fishing, and small-scale trade have seen those options decline. At the same time, industrialisation in the region remains limited. This has reduced traditional pathways to advancement and has increased pressure on young people to seek opportunities outside their communities. With few alternatives available locally, migration and dependence on political patronage have become common survival strategies [10].

Cross River State provides a clear example of how these national and regional dynamics play out at the subnational level. Historically, the state had several avenues for upward mobility. Calabar's role as an administrative center gave residents early access to Western education and civil service jobs. The hinterland areas were involved in cash crop production, while riverine communities depended on fishing and trade. However, in the last two decades, the state has experienced significant fiscal and economic shocks. The ceding of the Bakassi Peninsula and the loss of oil-well status reduced both internally generated revenue and federal allocation. This contraction limited the government's ability to invest in infrastructure, social services, and job creation. As the formal economy shrank, access to resources became more closely tied to political networks. At the same time, social differentiation increased. Elite families maintained their position by sending their children to private schools and universities abroad, while the majority faced limited options. The result is a context in which mobility is possible for those with political connections, but extremely difficult for those who must rely on merit alone [11].

Beyond these structural factors, scholars have also noted the role of social closure in reproducing inequality in Nigeria. Social closure refers to the process by which groups restrict access to resources and opportunities to maintain their advantage. This can take the form of controlling entry into elite

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schools, professional associations, and political parties. In Nigeria, social closure is evident in the dominance of a few families in politics and business, the use of godfatherism to control nominations, and the preference for hiring from within established networks. This process ensures that advantages are transferred across generations and that competition is limited. Over time, this leads to the entrenchment of class divisions and the weakening of meritocratic ideals [12].

Another important dimension is the impact of blocked mobility on youth and social cohesion. When young people see no legitimate path to success, they may become disengaged from mainstream institutions. Research on youth in Nigeria has linked prolonged unemployment and underemployment to increased participation in the informal economy, irregular migration, and in some cases, involvement in criminal or violent activities. This suggests that mobility is not only an economic issue but also a social and security issue. Societies that fail to provide legitimate channels for advancement risk creating a generation that feels excluded and alienated [13]. Taken together, the literature points to several consistent findings. First, mobility in Nigeria is increasingly constrained by institutional factors, economic structure, and social networks. Second, education remains important but is no longer sufficient on its own to guarantee upward movement. Third, regional and state-level shocks can significantly narrow opportunity structures. Fourth, processes of social closure ensure that privilege is reproduced across generations. Despite this body of work, there remains a gap in the literature regarding Cross River State specifically. Most studies on mobility and inequality in Nigeria focus on Lagos, Abuja, or the core Niger Delta oil-producing states. There is limited empirical research that examines how the combination of fiscal shocks, political patronage, and limited economic diversification has affected mobility in Cross River. This gap justifies the present study, which seeks to understand how structural inequality is produced and experienced in the state.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary sociological theories: Structural Functionalism and Conflict Theory. These theories provide different but related lenses for understanding stratification and mobility.

Structural functionalism

Structural functionalism views society as a system of interrelated parts that work together to maintain stability and equilibrium. From this perspective, social inequality and mobility serve important functions. The classic argument is that societies must ensure that the most important positions are filled by the most qualified and capable individuals. To achieve this, societies attach different rewards to different positions in order to motivate people to undergo training and to make sacrifices. Mobility is therefore functional because it allows talent to rise and ensures that roles are performed efficiently [14].

Applied to Cross River State, functionalism provides a standard for evaluating the current situation. Institutions such as education, the civil service, and the economy are expected to reward achievement and to provide pathways for upward movement. When these institutions function well, the state benefits

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from competent leadership, effective service delivery, and social integration. However, when mobility is blocked and positions are filled based on patronage, the system becomes dysfunctional. Talented individuals are excluded, inefficiency increases, and social frustration grows. Functionalism thus helps to explain why blocked mobility is not only a social problem but also a developmental problem.

Conflict theory

Conflict theory, with roots in the work of Karl Marx and later developed by scholars such as C. Wright Mills and Frank Parkin, argues that stratification exists because dominant groups use their power to monopolise resources and to exclude others. From this perspective, inequality is not functional but is the result of competition and domination. Mobility is limited not by accident but by design, as elites use various mechanisms to protect their interests [15].

A central concept in conflict theory is social closure. This refers to the process by which groups restrict access to resources and opportunities in order to maintain their advantage. In the Nigerian context, social closure is evident in the control of political nominations, the allocation of government contracts, and access to elite education. In Cross River State, where the economy is heavily dependent on government spending, control over the state becomes the primary means of accumulating wealth and status. Political elites use their position to distribute jobs and contracts to loyalists and family members. This limits competition and ensures that privilege is reproduced across generations. Conflict theory therefore helps to explain why merit is often bypassed and why inequality persists despite formal commitments to equality.

Integration of structural functionalism and conflict theory

While structural functionalism describes what mobility should do for society, conflict theory explains why it often fails to do so. This study integrates both perspectives to provide a comprehensive analysis. Functionalism sets the normative ideal: a society should allocate positions based on merit to remain stable and productive. Conflict theory provides the explanatory framework: power and interest determine how opportunities are actually distributed.

Using this integrated framework, the study examines social mobility in Cross River State as the outcome of both institutional performance and elite action. It investigates whether the institutions that should facilitate achievement-based mobility are still functional. It also examines how processes of social closure, patronage, and political control have produced structural inequality. Furthermore, the framework allows the study to assess the consequences of blocked mobility for youth development, social cohesion, and long-term stability. By linking individual experiences to broader structural dynamics, this framework moves beyond description to explanation. It also provides a basis for policy recommendations. If the problem is institutional dysfunction, then the solution lies in reforming recruitment, education, and public administration. If the problem is elite capture, then the solution must address accountability,

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transparency, and the broadening of access to opportunity.

Historical and structural context of mobility in cross river state historical context

The history of social mobility in Cross River State is inseparable from its early role as an administrative and commercial centre in pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria. Calabar, the state capital, was one of the earliest points of contact between Europeans and the peoples of the Niger Delta and the Cross-River basin. From the 16th to the 19th century, the port of Calabar was a major centre of trade in palm oil, ivory, and other commodities. This early integration into global trade created a merchant class and exposed the region to new forms of wealth accumulation that were not entirely dependent on lineage or traditional authority [16].

The colonial period further expanded mobility opportunities in the area. Calabar served as the administrative capital of the Southern Protectorate and later the Eastern Region. The presence of colonial administration, missionary schools, and health institutions introduced Western education and formal employment to the region earlier than in many other parts of Nigeria. Missionary schools such as Hope Waddell Training Institution produced some of the first generation of teachers, clerks, nurses, and pastors in the region. For many families, education became the primary vehicle for moving from subsistence livelihoods into salaried employment. The civil service, railways, and port services also provided stable jobs that allowed individuals to improve their status regardless of background [11].

After independence in 1960 and the creation of the South Eastern State in 1967, later renamed Cross River State in 1976, the public sector remained the dominant channel of mobility. Government employment in ministries, schools, hospitals, and parastatals provided income security and social prestige. Alongside the public sector, agriculture and trade continued to offer alternative pathways. The state's cocoa, palm produce, and timber industries employed thousands in the hinterland areas of Ikom, Boki, and Obudu. Riverine communities in Bakassi, Oron, and Akpabuyo depended on fishing and maritime trade. Communal labor groups, age grades, and kinship networks also provided informal support for apprenticeship and small business start-ups. This period can be described as one where both achievement and ascription mattered, but achievement through education and public service was a viable route for many [17].

However, the last two decades have marked a turning point. Two major structural shocks redefined the context of mobility in the state. The first was the ceding of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon in 2008 following the ICJ judgment. Bakassi was a major fishing and trading zone that supported thousands of households. Its loss led to displacement, loss of livelihoods, and a sharp drop in internally generated revenue. The second shock was the reclassification of oil wells that shifted derivation revenue away from Cross River. As an oil-producing state, Cross River had relied on 13% derivation to fund infrastructure and social services. The loss of this status reduced federal allocation and forced the state to depend almost entirely on statutory allocation from Abuja [11].These events narrowed the economic base of the

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state and weakened the institutions that previously facilitated mobility. With reduced revenue, government hiring froze, capital projects slowed, and support for agriculture and SMEs declined. This created a context where opportunity became scarcer and more competitive.

Structural Context

The current structural context of mobility in Cross River State is shaped by four interrelated factors: economic structure, institutional capacity, social stratification, and demographic pressure.

Economic structure and dependence on the state

Cross River State has a mono-dependent economy centred on government spending. The private sector is small and dominated by trading, services, and subsistence agriculture. There is limited manufacturing and industrialisation. Major projects such as the Tinapa Business Resort and the Calabar Free Trade Zone have not generated the level of employment expected. As a result, access to stable income is concentrated in the public sector. This makes mobility dependent on the state's fiscal health and hiring capacity. When allocation from the federal government declines, the entire opportunity structure contracts. Research on state economies in Nigeria shows that where the private sector is weak, competition for public jobs intensifies and access is mediated by patronage rather than merit [12].

Institutional capacity and governance

The institutions that should facilitate mobility, education, civil service, and the justice system, face capacity constraints. Public schools and health centers are underfunded, which affects the quality of human capital. The civil service recruitment process is often influenced by political considerations. Studies of governance in Nigerian states indicate that in contexts of fiscal stress, political leaders use appointments and contracts to build and maintain political coalitions. This turns public office into a tool of patronage. In Cross River, the concentration of opportunity in government has made political godfatherism a key determinant of who gets ahead. Qualification remains important, but connection often serves as the gatekeeper [8].

Social stratification and social closure

Over time, a distinct class structure has emerged in the state. At the top is a political and business elite with access to state resources, private education, and external networks. This group reproduces its position through social closure: exclusive schools, overseas training, and strategic marriages. The middle class consists of civil servants, teachers, and professionals whose status depends on continued government employment. At the bottom is a large population engaged in subsistence farming, fishing, and informal trading. For this group, mobility is limited by lack of capital, poor infrastructure, and weak market access. The gap between these classes has widened because the mechanisms for moving from the bottom to the middle, such as quality public education and entry-level government jobs, have become less effective [7].

Demographic pressure and youth bulge

Cross River State has a young population, with a large proportion under the age of 35. The education system produces thousands of graduates every year from the

University of Calabar, Cross River University of Technology, and other tertiary institutions. However, the economy does not create enough jobs to absorb them. This demographic pressure creates a bottleneck. Many graduates experience prolonged unemployment or accept jobs below their qualification. For youth, the main mobility strategies have become migration to Lagos, Abuja, or abroad, and engagement in the informal economy. In some cases, frustration has led to involvement in cultism and cybercrime as alternative routes to income. This shows how structural constraints shape individual choices [13].

Spatial and regional disparities

Mobility chances also differ within the state. Calabar and its environs have better access to schools, hospitals, and government offices. The northern senatorial district has more agricultural potential but suffers from poor roads and market access. The southern riverine areas have been most affected by the loss of Bakassi and have limited alternatives to fishing. These spatial inequalities mean that a person's place of birth significantly affects their chances of upward movement. Infrastructure deficits in rural areas further limit access to information, credit, and markets that could support entrepreneurship [10].

Implications for mobility

The historical and structural context described above shows a clear shift. Historically, Cross River offered multiple pathways to mobility through education, civil service, agriculture, and trade. The structural context today is one of constrained opportunity. The economy is dependent on the state, the state has less revenue, and access to the state is mediated by patronage. This has three major implications. First, achievement-based mobility has declined. Education is still valued, but it no longer guarantees a job or income. Second, ascription-based mobility has increased. Family background, political connection, and ethnicity now play a larger role in determining outcomes. Third, the state is experiencing increased inequality and social frustration, particularly among youth who are educated but excluded.

Understanding this context is important because it explains why policies that worked in the past may no longer be effective. It also highlights that any attempt to improve mobility in Cross River must address both the economic structure and the way institutions distribute opportunity.

Contemporary pathways and barriers to social mobility in cross river state introduction

In contemporary Cross River State, social mobility is shaped by a mix of shrinking formal opportunities and expanding informal strategies. The traditional ladders of mobility, civil service, agriculture, and trade, still exist but have become narrower, more competitive, and more dependent on political and social connections. At the same time, new pathways have emerged, driven by technology, migration, and the informal economy. This section examines both the current pathways through which individuals attempt upward movement and the structural barriers that limit those efforts.

Contemporary pathways to social mobility

i. **Education and professional certification:** Education remains the most widely recognized

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pathway to mobility, but its returns have changed. Tertiary institutions in the state, University of Calabar and Cross River University of Technology, continue to produce graduates in education, health, law, and social sciences. For many families, sending a child to university is still seen as an investment in future status. However, the value of a degree now depends heavily on what follows it. Graduates who combine degrees with professional certifications in nursing, accounting, ICT, and education have better chances in both public and private sectors. In addition, those who can afford postgraduate study abroad use it to gain a competitive edge. The pathway still works, but it is longer, more expensive, and less certain than in previous decades [9].

ii. **Public sector employment and political appointment**: Despite fiscal constraints, government remains the most reliable source of stable income and prestige in the state. Jobs in ministries, local government, teaching, and health services are highly sought after. Beyond regular employment, political appointment has become a major mobility route. Positions as Special Advisers, Board Members, and aides provide income, influence, and access to contracts. Because the number of such positions is limited, access is determined largely by loyalty to political godfathers and party structures. This means that for many, upward movement now requires political participation and networking rather than just academic qualification [8].

iii. **Entrepreneurship and the informal economy**: With formal jobs scarce, many young people have turned to entrepreneurship. This includes small-scale trading in Marian Market, Watt Market, and Ikom, agro-processing, transportation, and services such as hairdressing, tailoring, and phone repairs. The informal economy absorbs a large portion of the labor force and allows some individuals to accumulate capital and improve their living standards. In Calabar, the growth of tourism, hospitality, and event services has also created opportunities for those with skills in catering, decoration, and entertainment. While risky and unstable, the informal sector remains one of the few spaces where initiative can translate directly into income without waiting for government [17].

iv. **Digital economy and remote work**: Technology has opened new mobility channels that did not exist ten years ago. Young people in Calabar and other urban centres engage in freelancing, graphic design, content creation, online tutoring, and crypto trading. Access to the internet and smartphones has made it possible to earn in dollars while living locally. This pathway is limited to those with digital skills and reliable power and data, but it represents a growing route for educated youth who are excluded from government jobs. It also allows some to bypass local patronage networks entirely [13].

v. **Migration and diaspora remittances**: Internal and international migration continues to be a major mobility strategy. Many graduates move to Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt in search of jobs. Others migrate abroad to Europe, the US, Canada, and increasingly to Gulf countries. Migration serves two purposes. First, it removes

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the individual from a saturated local labour market. Second, it generates remittances that support families back home and enable investment in housing, education, and small businesses. For many households in Cross River, diaspora support has become the most important source of capital accumulation [10].

vi. **Agriculture and Agro-business**: Although agriculture is no longer the dominant employer it once was, it remains a pathway for those in the northern and central parts of the state. Cocoa, plantain, cassava, and poultry farming provide income for rural households. With support from cooperatives and NGOs, some farmers have moved into processing and value addition. This pathway is limited by poor roads, lack of credit, and market challenges, but it still offers a route out of poverty for rural residents [17].

Barriers to social mobility

i. **Fiscal constraint and job scarcity**: The most fundamental barrier is the limited size of the formal economy. The loss of oil derivation revenue and the displacement from Bakassi reduced state income and investment capacity. With fewer government jobs and contracts available, competition has become intense. This scarcity makes every opportunity political and personal, rather than merit-based [11].

ii. **Patronage, godfatherism, and social closure**: Access to opportunity is increasingly mediated by who you know. Recruitment into government, award of contracts, and even admission into some professional programs are influenced by political patrons. Elite families maintain their position by controlling access to schools, jobs, and business licenses. This process of social closure means that those without connections face systematic exclusion regardless of talent. Over time, this reproduces inequality across generations [12].

iii. **Poor quality and relevance of education**: While enrollment has expanded, the quality of public education has declined due to underfunding. Many graduates lack the practical skills demanded by employers in the digital and service economy. There is also a mismatch between courses offered and labor market needs. This reduces the mobility power of education and forces many graduates into unemployment or underemployment [9].

iv. **Infrastructure deficit**: Poor roads, unreliable electricity, and limited internet access constrain both formal and informal enterprise. Farmers cannot get produce to market, small businesses face high operating costs from generators, and digital workers struggle with connectivity. Infrastructure deficits raise the cost of doing business and make it harder for individuals to convert skills into income [10].

v. Inequality in Access to Capital: Starting and growing a business requires capital, but access to credit is limited. Banks demand collateral that most young people do not have. Government empowerment programs are often politicized and reach only a few. Without capital, many talented individuals cannot move from ideas to enterprise. This barrier is particularly strong for women and rural residents [7].

vi. **Social and cultural expectations**: Mobility is also constrained by social norms. There is

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ISSN-3143-8822
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pressure to support extended family, which reduces the ability to save and invest. Gender norms limit women's access to land, credit, and leadership positions. In some communities, success is measured by political title rather than economic productivity, which pushes young people toward politics instead of business or technical skills.

The interaction of pathways and barriers

The contemporary situation in Cross River State is that pathways to mobility still exist, but they are all filtered through barriers. Education can lead to mobility, but only if combined with connections or migration. Entrepreneurship is possible, but only with capital and infrastructure. Government jobs offer security, but access is through patronage. The result is a system where effort alone is not enough. Individuals must combine personal achievement with strategic networking and often with leaving the state. This creates a pattern of segmented mobility. A small group with political and economic capital continues to move up. A middle group survives through migration and the informal sector. A large group at the bottom remains stuck, despite education and effort. This segmentation explains the rising frustration among youth and the perception that the system is unfair [13]. To the author, contemporary mobility in Cross River State is no longer linear. It is multi-path and highly competitive. The old model of "go to school, get government job, rise" has broken down. In its place are multiple routes, education plus certification, politics, migration, digital work, and entrepreneurship. However, each route is blocked by structural barriers of fiscal constraint, patronage, poor infrastructure, and inequality of access. The implication is that expanding mobility will require more than individual effort. It will require opening the economy, reducing dependence on patronage, investing in infrastructure and skills, and creating transparent systems of recruitment and support. Until that happens, mobility will remain limited and unequal.

Consequences of restricted mobility and class reproduction in cross river state

Restricted mobility and class reproduction have far-reaching consequences that affect not just individuals but the entire structure of society in Cross River State. When upward movement becomes difficult and social position is largely inherited, the effects are felt in the economy, in social relations, in politics, and in the daily lives of citizens. The current structure of opportunity in the state has produced several interrelated outcomes that undermine development and social cohesion.

One of the most visible consequences is the wastage of human capital and the resulting economic stagnation. Cross River State continues to produce thousands of graduates from the University of Calabar, Cross River University of Technology, and other tertiary institutions. However, when these graduates cannot find employment that matches their training, their skills are left unused. Prolonged unemployment leads to skill depreciation, where knowledge becomes outdated and confidence declines. Many graduates are forced to accept jobs far below their level of qualification, a situation that creates status inconsistency and reduces productivity. At the state level, this means that the economy cannot benefit

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from the investment made in education. Innovation slows down, entrepreneurship is limited, and the state remains dependent on federal allocation because it has not been able to build a productive local economy that can absorb its skilled labor force. The loss of derivation revenue and the contraction of the public sector have made this problem worse, because there are fewer formal jobs to absorb those who are qualified [9,11].

Another major consequence is the entrenchment of inequality and the reproduction of class across generations. In a system where mobility is restricted, advantage is transferred from parents to children rather than earned through personal effort. In Cross River, elite families maintain their position through access to private education, political networks, and capital. They send their children to expensive schools within and outside the country, use connections to secure government jobs and contracts, and invest in property and businesses that generate income. For families without these resources, the barriers are higher at every stage. Children from poor households attend underfunded public schools, have no access to mentorship or internships, and lack the social networks needed to enter government or business. Over time, this creates a rigid class structure where birth determines life chances more than achievement. Research on inequality shows that in societies with low mobility, the gap between the rich and the poor widens with each generation because the system is designed to protect existing advantages. In Cross River, this is reflected in the concentration of political appointments and economic opportunities within a few families and political circles [12,18].

Restricted mobility also produces social frustration and contributes to deviance among youth. When young people invest years in education but see no return, they experience anger, disappointment, and a sense of exclusion. This frustration is particularly strong because education is still presented as the main pathway to success. When that pathway fails, trust in institutions declines. In South-South Nigeria, studies have linked prolonged unemployment and blocked mobility to increased involvement in cybercrime, cultism, irregular migration, and substance abuse. These are not the only outcomes, and not all unemployed youth engage in these behaviors, but the lack of legitimate opportunities increases vulnerability to exploitation. At the community level, this erodes social cohesion because people begin to see the system as unfair and begin to rely only on their immediate networks for survival. The result is a society where collective action for development becomes difficult [13].

Politically, restricted mobility leads to increased dependence on patronage and weakened governance. When access to jobs, contracts, and resources depends on political connection, public institutions become less effective. Recruitment into the civil service and appointments to government positions are often based on loyalty rather than competence. This affects the quality of service delivery and reduces the capacity of the state to plan and implement development programs. In Cross River, where the economy is heavily dependent on government spending, political office has become the main route to wealth and influence. This intensifies competition for power and increases the role of money politics. Elected officials spend more time rewarding

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ISSN-3143-8822
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supporters than addressing policy issues, and citizens relate to the state as clients rather than as rights-bearing members of society. This weakens democracy and reduces accountability because political survival depends more on distributing favors than on performance [8].

Migration is another consequence. When local opportunities are limited, the most educated and ambitious young people leave the state. Internal migration to Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt has become common, and international migration to Europe, Canada, and Gulf countries is increasing. Migration provides an escape route for individuals and also generates remittances that support families back home. However, it also leads to brain drain. The state loses doctors, engineers, teachers, and entrepreneurs who could have contributed to local development. The people who remain are often those with the least resources to leave. Over time, this reduces the human capital base needed for growth and makes it harder for the state to diversify its economy [10].

Finally, restricted mobility erodes social trust and cohesion. In a society where people believe that success depends on who you know rather than what you know, faith in fairness declines. There is growing cynicism about the value of education, because parents see graduates who are unemployed. There is resentment between those with political access and those without. Gender inequality is also reinforced, because women often have less access to the political networks that mediate opportunity. In rural areas, limited access to land, credit, and markets further restricts women's ability to move up. When entire groups are excluded, the state cannot use the full potential of its population and poverty is reproduced within households [7,17].

Taken together, these consequences show that restricted mobility is not just a personal problem. It is a structural problem with economic, social, and political implications. It leads to wasted talent, entrenched inequality, social instability, weak governance, and population loss. Addressing these outcomes will require more than individual effort. It will require reforms that open the economy, reduce dependence on patronage, improve the quality of education, and create transparent systems for recruitment and support. Without such changes, Cross River State will continue to reproduce the same patterns of inequality, with a small elite at the top and a large population struggling at the bottom.

Summary

This study examined social mobility in Cross River State, with a focus on contemporary pathways, barriers, and the consequences of restricted mobility and class reproduction. The review of literature shows that mobility in Nigeria, and specifically in Cross River State, has shifted from being largely achievement-based to being increasingly determined by patronage, political connection, and family background. Historically, Cross River State offered multiple routes to upward movement. Calabar's early role in trade and colonial administration, the expansion of missionary and public education, and the growth of the civil service and agriculture provided opportunities for many to improve their status. However, structural shocks in the last two decades, including the ceding of Bakassi and the loss of oil-well status, reduced state revenue and narrowed the

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Journal of Entrepreneurship and Global Economic Leadership
ISSN-3143-8822
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economic base. This made government the dominant but limited source of formal employment.

Contemporary pathways to mobility now include education combined with professional certification, public sector employment and political appointment, entrepreneurship in the informal economy, engagement in the digital economy, migration and remittances, and agriculture. However, each of these pathways is constrained by barriers. The major barriers identified are fiscal constraints and job scarcity, patronage and social closure, poor quality and relevance of education, infrastructure deficits, unequal access to capital, and social expectations that limit certain groups, especially women and rural residents.

The consequences of these restrictions are wide. The state experiences wastage of human capital, entrenchment of inequality across generations, social frustration and youth deviance, weakened governance due to patronage, brain drain through migration, and erosion of social trust. Using Structural Functionalism and Conflict Theory, the study explained that while institutions should facilitate merit-based mobility, in reality power and elite interests have blocked these pathways and reproduced inequality.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that social mobility in Cross River State is currently restricted and unequal. The institutions that should serve as engines of achievement-based mobility, education, the civil service, and the economy, are not functioning optimally. The economy is too dependent on government, and government itself is constrained by limited revenue and politicised access. As a result, mobility is no longer a straightforward process of "education leading to employment." Instead, it has become a segmented process where those with political and economic capital continue to move up, while a large proportion of educated youth and rural residents remain stuck. Class reproduction is occurring because advantages are transferred across generations through exclusive education, networks, and control of state resources. This situation has serious implications for development. A state that cannot provide fair and open pathways for its citizens will continue to experience talent wastage, out-migration, social frustration, and poor governance. The current pattern undermines the goals of fairness, productivity, and social cohesion. Therefore, addressing mobility is not just a social issue but a core development issue for Cross River State.

Recommendations

To address the problems of restricted mobility and class reproduction in Cross River State, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Economic diversification and job creation**

The state government should prioritize policies that expand the private sector beyond dependence on public spending. Investment should be directed toward agro-processing, tourism, ICT, and light manufacturing. The Calabar Free Trade Zone and Tinapa should be revitalised with incentives for businesses that create entry-level jobs for graduates. Public-Private Partnerships can be used to fund infrastructure that supports business growth.

2. **Reform of public service recruitment**

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Recruitment and promotion in the civil service should be based on merit, transparency, and competitive examination. The use of political patronage should be reduced through the strengthening of the Civil Service Commission and the adoption of e-recruitment systems. This will restore public trust and ensure that competent people fill key positions.

3. **Improvement of education quality and relevance**

Government should increase funding for public schools and tertiary institutions. Curriculum should be reviewed to align with labor market needs, with more emphasis on technical, vocational, and digital skills. Partnerships with industry can provide internships and apprenticeships that link education to employment. Scholarship and student loan schemes should be expanded to support students from low-income families.

4. **Support for entrepreneurship and access to capital**

Youth and women should be supported with access to credit, business training, and markets. Empowerment programs should be depoliticized and targeted based on need and viability, not party affiliation. The state should work with banks and microfinance institutions to create low-interest loan schemes with flexible collateral requirements.

5. **Infrastructure development**

Investment in roads, electricity, and internet connectivity is critical. Good infrastructure reduces the cost of doing business and enables both rural farmers and urban digital workers to participate in the economy. Special attention should be given to connecting agricultural areas to markets.6. Strengthening Accountability and Reducing Social Closure.

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