

COVID-19 Pandemic and Social Fractures in Nigeria: Challenge to Public Policy Framing.

Abstract.

In response to COVID 19 Pandemic, the first primary and immediate response of countries all over the world, including Nigeria, has been to introduce series of protocol, including lockdown (and its “relaxation”), and other public health guidelines on the large section of the population and business activities, as attempts to reduce the spread of the pandemic. However, implicated in the lockdown protocols has also been “irreparable damage” on the people, and their socio-economic activities; unleashing twin problems of deprivation and anxiety, for people in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Evidence continue to show that strict lockdown directives not only affect social life of the people, but more significantly, with dire consequences on their livelihood.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Social Vulnerability, Public Policy

Introduction and Conceptual Clarification

As economic activities in many countries of SSA are characterized by high level of informality and urban concentration (Ebrahim 2020; Ray et al. 2020), the implication is that large section of the population would, prior COVID 19, have to leave their home daily to access means of livelihood. It also implies that many households and family members in this sector live on a “hand-to-mouth basis” with limited savings, and also do not have the capacity to work from home (Dingel and Neiman, 2018). The challenges of lockdown are mostly felt by those in the informal sector of self-own businesses, and of high density urban neighborhoods (Raju and Ayeb-Karlsson, 2020).

In this short review and evaluation, this paper examine the extent to which lockdown and other COVID 19 pandemic protocols affect the pre-existing socio-economic activities and conditions of livelihood of those in informal sector in Nigeria, the vulnerable in particular, and entrepreneurs, in Nigeria.

In the context of COVID 19 pandemic, lockdown is broadly described as public health policy directives on the citizens, to stay at home and avoid public space gathering, as part of measures to mitigate irreversible damage to their health and welfare (Eva-Maria Egger et al. 2020). With insights from this conceptual understanding, the paper explores five “minimum dimensions” that influence and determine “readiness” of the citizens for lockdown. As noted by Eva-Maria Egger et al. (2020); within the household, the family is assumed to already have access to the basics .i.e. safe drinking water; basic hygiene/sanitation; source of reliable energy, and a means of information or communication, such as mobile phone, and more significantly, an assurance of means of livelihood that provide sufficient income, to limit going out, on a frequent basis. On the

other hand, if at basic minimal levels, these are not met, members of the household will need to go out to places; to congregate for socio-economic purposes. And because their congregations for socio-economic activities (employment or jobs) are characterized by informality, the understanding is that, these categories of people are not prepared for lockdown.

The informality of their source of income, therefore, remains a critical concern during period of lockdown, especially for those in urban settings, where also, the need for “social distancing” and other protocols remain imperative. Indeed, the vulnerability and uncertainty that characterized the informal employment sector intensify the impact and consequences of the lockdown on the population. Lockdown directives and subsequent ease in Nigeria, and in the context of high level of households’ poverty and socio-economic vulnerability are expected to impact negatively on informal sector entrepreneurial activities.

“Ease Lockdown”, Strict Protocols and the Characteristics of Informal Sector Employment in Nigeria.

As noted by the ILO, over eighty per-cent of working people are employed in the informal sector in Nigeria (ILO, 2018). The impact of lockdown could therefore be expected to be far-reaching, not only on their coping strategies for economic survival, but also exacerbating panics and anxieties, associated with the virus, in the first instance. Before now, the lockdown directives were on States of commercial, businesses and government nerve centers of the country; Lagos, being the country’s major economic center as well as financial capital, and Abuja; the seat of government, and Ogun, because of its proximity to Lagos and a major manufacturing hub in Nigeria.

As expected, those significantly affected by the lockdown and its subsequent ease are predominantly urban informal sectors employees. Broadly, their informal economic activities include micro and small scale enterprises and artisanship. On the street sides are also traders and vendors. There are also home-based enterprises, informal employees of formal enterprises; making daily or weekly wages (Obiakor, 2020). These are the first category of people of households, and heads of households, to bear the brunt of lockdown. Significantly, in their capacity and roles as household heads and “bread-winners”, their regular familial obligations and responsibilities are affected. The lockdown restricts their daily physical movement outside their homes to generate income for their households. Their vulnerability to negative consequences surrounding low-employment status transcends further to their health, welfare and dignity; as their capability to access basic needs for decent living and health services, already compounded by lack of resources, is further restricted by the lockdown.

For this category of workers in the informal sector (of all descriptions), the intensifying impact of lockdown reverberates on all aspects of their existential living, and obligations. In Nigeria, the strong interface between poverty and informality of jobs remain another dimensions of impact of COVID 19, and its attendant temporary blockage of physical movement for means of livelihood.

The employment characteristics of informal sector of varying descriptions, is underpinned by the same feature; “precarity” as a source of daily employment for them, absorbing those with low education and low-skill formation. While the sector remains a source of income, the security of the income now seem to have been disrupted by COVID 19, and restrictions of movement, thereby intensifying their precarity and deprivation, and that of their households’ members.

The endemic feature of low-income and income insecurity; reflecting the situation of “hand-to-mouth” mode of living makes it difficult for the urban informal sector workers of the description in the analysis, to save for the future. Even in the face of on-going challenges of COVID 19, the ability and predisposition to save for the future remains bleak, as they are daily preoccupied with survival, panic and anxiety. However, while they may be able to mobilize, and utilize their “social capital”, to smoothen consumptions-needs, their income and capacity could just be barely enough to sustain them for future. Their “meager saving” which also fluctuates may exclude them from formal access to asset saving. As observed by Obiakor (2020), the micro-entrepreneurs might be stuck with predatory loan repayment with high interest, especially the recipients of microloans and finance. For this category of workers, therefore, persistence of the pandemic and its attendant protocols could be expected to throw them and their households into long-drawn precarious situation. The financial constraints, attendant of COVID 19, and the restrictions continue to stretch the coping capability of the over-burden low employment workers of the informal sector, in Nigeria.

Shortages of Food amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

As the Pandemic crisis ravages, Nigeria is seeing rising food price inflation as supply chains are affected, not only because of poor and weak agricultural policy and implementation, but also as a result of lack of incentives for the subsistence farmers. As the pandemic crisis threatens food supply chains, speculative hoarding has started, triggering price increases. Higher food prices are already reflecting imminent shortages. These impacts can compound each other in a vicious cycle likely to cause social unrest. Already, public authority in Nigeria has banned the importation of basic food commodities such as rice and edible oil, without adequate plan for local production of the staple food items, thereby increasing inflation and negatively affecting informal businesses and consumers. In addition, many small importers, traders, and poor consumers in Nigeria, are being seriously affected by the pandemic crisis as they earn their livelihood in trading Chinese products such as textiles, electronics, and household goods (OECD 2020)

Informal Workers, Health systems and Social Vulnerability

Impact on health systems

Even though the spread of the virus seems to be slower across the countries in Africa, Nigeria continues to record rise in the spread, with major strains on the health systems. According to W.H.O data, across Africa, there are only approximately 1.2 hospital beds per 1000 people. This

is compared to 6.5 in France, 3.5 in Italy and 3 in Spain, the United States and the United Kingdom (OECD, 2020) Also, data collected by Afrobarometer Round 7 from more than 45800 respondents across 34 African countries over 2016-18 highlight that hundreds of millions lack access to health care (Howard, 2020) or clean water for frequent hand washing and cleaning (Howard, 2020); a critical means of limiting the spread of the virus. Lack of access to clean water and medical care in African countries further compound the crisis of the pandemic, <http://afrobarometer.org/data>.

The growing number of COVID-19 patients risk overcrowding health facilities, and more unfortunately, patients with high burden diseases like AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria could lack access to adequate care. Patients with other active diseases such as Lassa fever, in Nigeria and Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo may also be affected (OECD, 2020). The Pandemic crisis could have an impact on treating other diseases in Africa. Moreover, the implementation of lockdown policies could have negative impact on other infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis (TB). The full health impact of the pandemic in Africa is not yet known, even as the health facilities are already weak. And where it is expected that infection could be offset by people's immune system, especially, the younger population, the capacity to test, isolate and treat, is limited by the weak health system.

Informality and social vulnerability

In Nigeria, the informal workforce bears the highest vulnerability, due to health system and safety conditions, and lack of sustainable social protection. About 86% of total employment in Africa is informal, with up to 91% in West African countries.(OECD, 2020). As more and more African countries go under coronavirus lockdown, survival for many may be threatened not only by COVID-19, but also job (work) insecurity. Informal workers such as traders, retail, and manual workers are among the hardest hit as lockdowns protocols force them out of work. Given their poor working and living conditions, informal workers might be unable to heed many of the precautions suggested by health authorities, such as social distancing or self-isolation. Informal workers are “less accounted” for, and as a result, benefit disproportionately from social protection measures. The absence of comprehensive and sustainable “safety nets” to confront the impact of the Pandemic shock, thus, worsens its consequences on large segments of the vulnerable population.

The ILO estimated that 82% of Africans are without social protection (ILO, 2017), with only a small part of the economically active population covered by statutory social security schemes, most of which are old-age pension schemes.

Without strong policy intervention, the crisis may further deepen already endemic inequality, and exacerbate resentments among the most vulnerable communities. In Nigeria, spike in COVID-19 cases may have primarily hit the “wealthier”, the elites, and internationally mobile population, however as rigorous and concerted efforts are lacking in containing the spread, and as

community transmission is on the rise, the pandemic now poses a high risk to lower-income communities who rely on public transportation to earn daily living through public gathering in the market space. They do not have sufficient saving and thus must continue to commute to work. They rarely can afford hygiene products. They reside in informal urban settlements, and live in large household. Their pre-existing social and economic vulnerabilities-risks magnify the impact of the crisis.

The World Bank estimates that the COVID-19 crisis could push 49 million people globally into extreme poverty in 2020, of which almost 23 million in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2020). Nigeria is currently challenged by socio-economic and security conditions—such as violence and conflicts, food shortages, with high concentration of refugee camps, in the North East region of the country. They are most vulnerable to the impacts of the contagion.

Based on socio-demographic dimensions of vulnerability, (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020) reports have it that South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and Nigeria are the most exposed, mainly due to i) poor health systems, ii) existing armed conflicts, iii) large displaced populations in refugee camps, iv) total population living in urban areas, and v) low government transparency and trust in public institutions. The pandemic is already having an impact on the delivery of humanitarian assistance (The New Humanitarian, 2020).

Violence, and COVID-19 Pandemic: a “Double-Crisis”.

The crisis inflicted by violence, conflicts and other insurgences, and now COVID -19 pandemic, in Nigeria, remain one of the most disruptive and destabilizing serious situations in the country, in particular, in North East part of the country; exacerbating forced displacement, social division and dislocation, thereby threatening State-Citizens cohesion. As a result, the displaced individuals and victims fall into insidious cycle of poverty and indignity. Currently in Nigeria, initiatives targeted at bringing hope and dignified ways of life and livelihood remain dim and unsustainable. The challenges of re-integrating and re-building “social contract” with the survivors of violence, conflicts, and COVID 19 pandemic remain one of the humanitarian crises in Nigeria.

In “leaving no survivors behind”, and to cohere the citizens with the State, vulnerable and displaced individuals need to be comprehensively integrated into a sustainable health, economic and means of livelihood, by the public authorities, in Nigeria. While this paper seeks to interrogate the current public policy framework (as drivers of social contract), underpinning mitigation assistance, and in combating

COVID 19 pandemics, it is argued that only a transformative socio-economic policy, can rekindle the hope for social cohesion, and “bring back” a dignified well-being for the people. The paper re-conceptualizes, and evaluates the “credentials” of current public policy architecture in Nigeria, in rebuilding State-Citizens cohesion and sustainable livelihood.

The outbreak and wide spread of COVID 19 in the fragile and weak State of Nigeria has also been accompanied by a protracted economic, institutional, and security crises, with dire implications and challenges on the population, particularly the vulnerable. Nigeria with a population of over two million people, and nearly sixty percent of the people lacks access to basic health services, the impact of COVID 19 could be expected to be catastrophic. In Nigeria, we have a context of fragile and weak health system, scarce and unhygienic water system, cramped and unhygienic living conditions, and on top, precarious means of livelihood. In this context, measures to contain and combat the pandemic remain problematic and elusive; portraying a long term challenge. At the “underbelly”, Nigeria continues to grapple with long-term impacts of conflicts and violence, weak institutional governance, prolonged weak economy; all driven by a “pandemic of poor leadership”. In a fragile State such as Nigeria, where “active conflicts” and “weak economic system” meet, current responses could only continue to pose challenges to public policy initiatives, and render the existing public policy framework inadequate and unsustainable, to respond “proportionately” and “equitably” to all categories of population.

It is argued in this paper, that weak and insufficient social protection responses to conflict and violence, and pandemic, will further exacerbate crises with deeper economic, political and security implications. The most vulnerable members of the society; the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), especially women, aged, and children are particularly affected, given the endemic “social barriers” they continue to face in accessing health care, education and decent work opportunities. Amid crises -conflicts, insurgency and pandemics, displaced populations are not often taken care of in a sustainable process by the public authorities. They are not comprehensively protected by the “safety nets” hurriedly put in place, by the national preparedness and response plans; thereby exposing them further to unsafe and precarious human

existence. In the present circumstance of COVID-19 pandemic, lack of sufficient preparedness and failure of the public authorities become acute; a tipping towards social disaster! The outbreak and the current responses have led to significant economic crises, even at national level, thereby compromising the ability of the most vulnerable to meet their basic needs.

Pandemics of this nature remain drivers of insecurity, precarity, social fractures, and localized violence; compromising humanitarian programming and posing challenges to national protocol of containing and combating the repercussions. The outbreak has brought unexpected escalations of conflicts, human rights abuses, threat to human security and dignity, tensions between the local populations and IDPs; with attendant stigmatization, violence and pressures from the host communities over access to limited resources.

Coping Strategies, and Government Intervention: “missing the Mark”!

As part of attempts to “cushion” the impact of lockdown and other protocols on those categories of workers in the informal entrepreneurship, and the most vulnerable of the larger populations, the public authorities in Nigeria have introduced a number of intervention programs. While detail analysis and empirical evaluations of the on-going interventions recommend itself for further research work, it is instructive to note that the broad objectives and implementations of the programs, have nevertheless, thrown up some preliminary critical challenges. For instance, as noted by Obiakor (2020), the informal economy in Lagos alone, where the lockdown started, employs 5.5 million people; representing almost three-quarter of the States 7.5 million labour force population, with thirteen million non-working population (quoting National Bureau of Statistics). Impliedly, the “cash transfer” (conditional or non-conditional) component of the intervention could only cater for three-quarter (5.5 million), of non-working population; indicating, overall, a low significant impact on those in the category of the population. Also, the National Social Register consisting about eleven million people, of 2.6 million households, to which the safety nets programs are anchored, would not make any meaningful impact. This is apart from the poor/low coverage of the Register.

As with all institutional programs in Nigeria, the intervention programs remain problematic, both in intention and implementation. The absence of reliable and comprehensive database would make it difficult to determine, in a sustainable process, the institutional financial needs of targets groups, even in the context of COVID 19. As of now institutional evaluations to assess impacts are still sketchy and unclear. Indeed, given the current circumstance of lockdown, and even ease

of restrictions broadly, physical movement of people is further constrained for macro-economic activities; the manufacturing and industry. Where the real sector of the economy is not fully producing, sustainable wealth distribution, through income, is also affected with impact on households. In Nigeria, COVID 19 pandemic will, for a long period deepens poverty and vulnerabilities of the large segment of the population, even in the context of palliative measures currently being implemented by the public authorities.

In Nigeria, a fiscal stimulus package in the form of a COVID-19 intervention fund of N500 billion (USD 1.4 billion), has been approved by the President to support healthcare facilities, provide relief for taxpayers, and incentivize employers to retain and recruit staff during the downturn (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2020). At present, preliminary and scholarly comments and observation arising from this policy directive is to note that such pronouncement from Nigeria public authority is no different from previous and numerous socio-economic plans without measurable and sustainable impact on the wellbeing and livelihood of the people.

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