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NOTES FROM THE FIELD | COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: Palliative Measures and the Politics of Vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

In a bid to slow the rate of spread of the virus, the Federal Government of Nigeria, on several occasions, imposed targeted lockdown measures in areas with rapid increase of Covid-19 cases. The states in which the federal government imposed the targeted lockdown included Lagos, Ogun, and the Federal Capital Territory in Abuja. Some States in the country imposed partial lockdown and closure of interstate boarders. Curfews have also been introduced in all the states nationwide. To alleviate the effects of the lockdown, the Federal Government of Nigeria rolled out palliative measures for targeted groups. However, lamentations have trailed the distribution of government palliatives by the masses. Citizens allege that the process of distribution of palliatives had been politicized.

Key words: • Corona virus • Covid-19 • Nigeria • Palliatives

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The novel Coronavirus popularly known as COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a new strain of Coronavirus first discovered in Wuhan, the Hubei region of China. 'CO' stands for corona; 'VI' for virus; and 'D' stands for disease. The disease was first referred to as '2019 novel-corona virus' or 2019-nCoV. The COVID-19 virus is linked to the same family of viruses such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). It is also related to some types of common cold.

Symptoms of COVID-19 include fever, cough, and shortness of breath. According to a report by the United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF) titled:

UNICEF Key Messages and Prevention and Control in Schools (March, 2020), "in more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia or breathing difficulties. More rarely, the disease can be fatal. These symptoms are similar to the flu (influenza) or the cold, which are a lot more common than COVID-19. This is why testing is required to confirm if someone has COVID-19."¹

The virus is transmitted through direct contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person (generated through coughing and sneezing). Individuals can also be infected from touching surfaces contaminated by the virus and touching their face (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). The COVID-19

virus may survive on surfaces for several hours but simple disinfectant can kill it,” says UNICEF.

In a bid to slow the rate of spread of the virus, the Federal Government of Nigeria, on several occasions, imposed targeted lockdown measures in areas with rapid increase of Covid-19 cases. The states in which the federal government imposed the targeted lockdown included Lagos, Ogun, and the Federal Capital Territory in Abuja. Some States in the country imposed partial lockdown and closure of interstate borders. Curfews have also been introduced in all the states nationwide.

According to Reuters News Agency, “the government extended a full lockdown in Kano State, the northern Nigeria economic hub where authorities are investigating a spate of mysterious deaths. Kano state has the second highest number of confirmed cases in country, after Lagos, the commercial capital.”²

As a way of cushioning the effect of the lockdown, the Federal Government of Nigeria rolled out the following palliative measures for targeted groups: three months interest holidays for those holding Tradermoni, Marketmoni, and Farmermoni loans issued by the Bank of Industry, Bank of Agriculture, and the Nigeria Export and Import Bank.

TraderMoni is a loan program of the Federal Government, created specifically for petty traders and artisans across Nigeria. It is a part of the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP) scheme of the Federal Government, being executed by the Bank of Industry. With *TraderMoni*, an individual can receive interest-free loans starting from Nigeria Naira, N10, 000 (exchange rate US \$1 = N400) and growing all the way to N100, 000 as the person pays back. Beneficiaries get N10, 000 as the first loan. When they pay back the first loan, they immediately qualify for a second loan of N15, 000. After payback of the second loan, they qualify for a N20, 000 loan, and then N50,000, and then N100, 000.³

MarketMoni, also known as the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP), issues interest-free loans to market women and

traders, artisans, youth and farmers. It is one of the social intervention programs of the Federal Government, and is being executed by the Bank of Industry. *MarketMoni* has kicked off disbursements to its early set of beneficiaries and is expanding across the country. Beneficiaries receive loans ranging from N10,000 to N100,000 per applicant for as long as 6 months. *MarketMoni* attracts no interest except a one-time 5% administrative fee. So far, over 24,000 beneficiaries have accessed *MarketMoni*.⁴

FarmerMoni is a Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) Initiative created to boost the Nigerian economy through leverage and access to finance for farmers. *FarmerMoni* is designed to help petty traders expand their trade through the provision of collateral free loans. The loans are repayable over a period of six months. Under the scheme, beneficiaries can get access to a higher facility ranging from N300,000 to N2,000,000 when they repay within the stipulated time period.⁵

The nation’s leader, President Mohammad Buhari, also announced an expansion of the initial number of households that would benefit from the direct distribution of food and cash from 2.6 million households to 3.6 million households, whom he described as most vulnerable in the society. He, therefore, directed the Ministries of Industry, Trade and Investment; Communication and Digital Economy; Science and Technology; Transportation; Interior; Health; Works and Housing; Labor and Employment; and Education, to jointly develop a comprehensive policy for a Nigerian economy functioning with COVID-19 pandemic.

There are, however, lamentations trailing the distribution of government palliatives by the masses. For instance, a national newspaper, *Business Day* on April 19, 2020, reported thus: “It is lamentation and bitter wailing in Lagos and parts of the country as Nigerians complain that the stimulus packages announced by the Federal and Lagos State governments to cushion the effects of the lockdown imposed on some States and the Federal Capital Territory to contain the further spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have not been sincerely deployed.”⁶ According to the newspaper,

the citizens alleged that the process of distribution of whatever that may have been made available for that purpose had been politicized.

It could be recalled that the Federal government had earlier said the palliatives were for the most vulnerable in the society, though there were no laid down parameters for determining the most vulnerable. For example, in Edo State, most of the residents claimed they were not aware if there was any distribution of palliatives in their localities. They alleged the palliatives were hijacked by politicians who now turned themselves to be vulnerable. The state's leadership borrowed a leaf from the federal government by saying that the palliative packages were for the most vulnerable.

The questions that loomed large and which both the federal and state governments are unable to answer is: who are the vulnerables? Is it that the federal government was unable to evolve a transparent process to ensuring fair distribution of the palliatives? Is the idea of undefined vulnerability a ploy by the governments to hijack the palliatives for their party faithfuls? What about those people that lost their jobs or income, are they to be regarded among the vulnerables?

Vulnerability in the common sense is when an individual is unable to cater for himself/herself or family as a result of a prevailing situation he/she is being faced with. This is in line with the precise but all encompassing definition of vulnerability given by James M. DuBois. According to DuBois, "Ordinarily, vulnerability simply refers to susceptibility to harm. In this sense, everyone is vulnerable because all human beings are capable of being harmed in many different ways."⁷

The Belmont Report refers to five basic categories of harm: social, economic, legal, psychological, and physical. For example, psychological harms may range from mild embarrassment to a psychotic relapse with significance resultant harms across all other categories: economic (lost employment), legal (e.g., being declared incompetent by a court, social (e.g., through stigma),...."⁷

The above definition helps in buttressing the fact that persons that have been asked to remain

indoors as a result of Covid-19-induced-lockdown are vulnerable; persons that lost their jobs are vulnerable; those that are locked behind bars are vulnerable; those that are facing one illness or the other are vulnerable; etc. The above groups ought to partake in the palliative measures of the government. Thus, the governments are supposed to implement schemes that will help cushion the effects of the lockdown for the broader groups of the vulnerable.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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