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COVID-19 and New Wave of Poverty in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the poverty status of vulnerable people in Nigeria and to also examine the impact of Government's several poverty eradication programmes targeted at reducing the poverty rate in the country. The study adopted qualitative and descriptive analysis of data gathered through integrative theoretical review of relevant previous studies coupled with key informant interview of 116 conveniently selected participants. Using this approach, the paper was able to examine the rate of poverty among vulnerable Nigerians before and during the outbreak of COVID-19, as well as discussing some social factors believed to be contributing to the high rate of poverty such as: bad leadership, corruption and illiteracy. Assessment of recent and many previous government's social intervention programmes aimed at reducing high rate of poverty and economic hardship confronting vulnerable people in Nigeria reveals that those programmes were grossly ineffective in achieving their mandates of reducing poverty, due to policy inconsistency, poor implementation, over-secrecy of guidelines involved, lack of transparency in the entire process and corruption on the part of the government officials in charge of the programmes. The study concluded that the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria has triggered another form of financial hardship and thereby worsened the existing poverty status of most vulnerable people in the country. It is therefore suggested that government must pay more attention to poverty reduction strategies, through the introduction of more pro-poor people programmes, that will be grounded on transparency, accountability and sincerity of purpose, in order to progressively and drastically reduce the country's high rate of poverty that has recently been aggravated by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Corruption, government policies, pandemic, poverty and vulnerable people

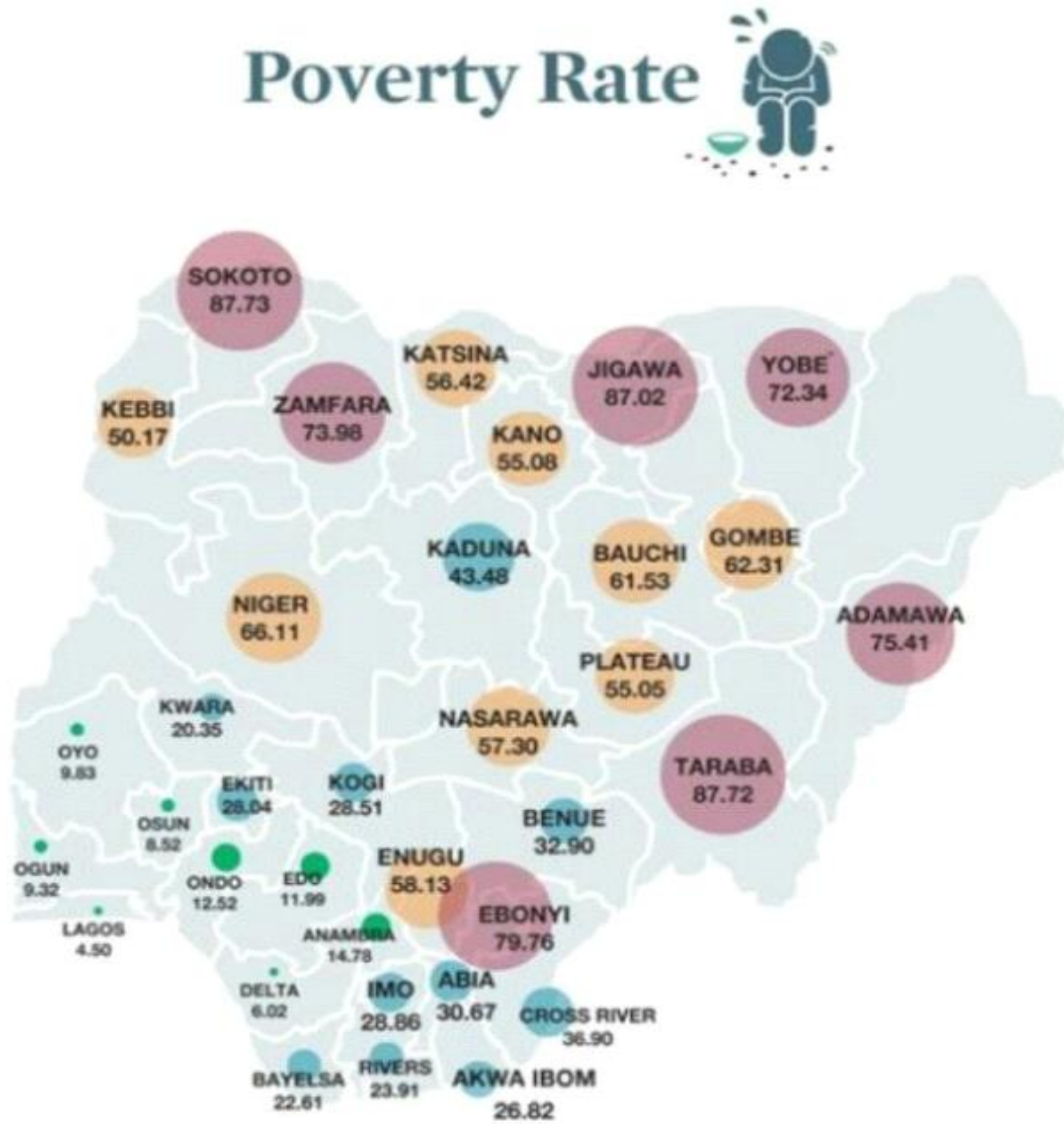
Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria has significantly caused additional pressure to the already threatening poverty status of the country. Having survived the economic recession of year 2016, it was generally believed that unexpected fall in oil price remained the most likely predictable cause of economic crises in Nigeria. But, nobody imagined that a public health crisis that emanated from COVID-19 could trigger an economic crisis in the country (Ozili, 2020). COVID-19 is an abbreviation of Coronavirus disease that was discovered in year 2019 in Wuhan province, China. For the past five decades, poverty has remained one of the most frequently used attributes for describing Nigeria as a country. Economically, Nigeria is regarded as an underdeveloped nation, due to its consistent lack of basic amenities and very weak economic power among the citizens. The problem of poverty in Nigeria dates back to its colonial era (Storey, 1953). It is most worrisome to realize that 60 years after Nigeria's independence, most of the factors that earned it the status before independence in 1960, still remain prominently unresolved till today. In many places, the situation is getting worse, as little or no improvement has been recorded in addressing those factors, which include but are not limited to: weak Gross Domestic Product (GDP), fragile socioeconomic status of the citizens, low ratio of medical personnel to general population, poor quality of life, poor standard of living, low access to formal education, as well as dearth of basic and social amenities in all Nigerian cities and towns (Olowa, 2012). Nigeria is not the only poor country in Africa, as most of the African countries are battling with a prolong problem of poverty (Beegle, Christiaensen, Dabalen, & Gaddis, 2016). According to a United Nations' report, all developing regions except Africa have reached the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of reducing poverty by half between 1990 and 2015 (UN, 2015). The International Fund for Agricultural Development's IFAD (2011) report further showed that an average of 1.4 billion people already trapped in extreme poverty and majority of these people are residing in many African countries including Nigeria.

Poverty as an important social concept has been examined from different perspectives by several researchers, as well as many reputable international organisations, such as: World Bank, United Nations, and International Monetary Fund (IMF). More so, in attempt to provide holistic description of poverty, Danaan (2018) defines poverty as complex, multidimensional and multifaceted with manifestations in the economic, social, political, environmental and other aspects of human life. In the same vein, poverty has been defined as a "status of humiliation, a sense of being dependent on the others, a condition of being forced to accept rudeness, insults, and even indifference when one seeks help" (Latvia, 1998 pg 2). Furthermore, the United Nations equally described poverty as a state of denial of choices and opportunities and a violation of human dignity, that directly leads to low consumption of food or inability to afford balance diets, or low health conditions, low educational level and lack of access to education, as well as poor housing condition (UN, 2020). In general, poverty simply means "the state of being poor". Buheji *et al*., (2020) further explained that, being poor in this context does not restrict to lack of financial resources alone. It certainly includes: lack of educational opportunities, inability to afford or access good health care services, lack of decent employment to make good living, difficulty in meeting minimum standard of living or inability to provide collateral for securing credit facilities. Using social and health perspectives, Buheji, (2019) categorizes poverty into two different types. First, the financial poverty, which he described as a situation where people living in poverty might have the asset, but not the cash flow and the second one is physical poverty, which is described as a condition where people in poverty would look poor, or have a health condition that carries the symptoms of indigence like malnutrition. Broadly speaking, poverty can mean high degree of insecurity, economic powerlessness and social exclusion of individuals, households and even communities. Furthermore, Karimu, & Muhammad (2017) stated that being poor may compel people to be living in fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation. Therefore, poverty is certainly capable of denying people the right to enjoy basic necessities of life.

Rate of Poverty in Nigeria before the Outbreak of COVID-19

Over the years, there is lack of uniform criteria in measuring poverty globally, but socioeconomic status has been very prominent in determining poverty level of a country, as individual's "income" remains the most consistent, most popular and most preferred parameter for measuring poverty in most countries of the world. Recent study showed that the international poverty line stood at US$1.9 per day (Sumner *et al.,* 2020). Based on the official report of a government agency in Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Nigeria poverty line stands at ₦137,430 per year, which is equivalent of $381.75 (NBS, 2020). This means that, those in Nigeria who earn below ₦137,430 per year, are clearly living in poverty. According to Buheji *et al.,* (2020) about 35% of Nigerian population - that is, 62 million Nigerians have been in this category since year 2015 when the country entered into economic recession that lasted almost two years. In the same vein, previous NBS reports showed an increase in Nigeria's poverty rate from 54.7% to 60.9% between year 2004 and year 2010 respectively. The agency explained that absolute poverty was measured in those reports by the number of people who could afford only the bare essentials of shelter, food and clothing. Meanwhile, some earlier NBS reports had shown a decrease in the country's poverty rate between the period of 1985 and 1992 as well as between 1996 and 2004.



Source: NBS, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA - 2019 POVERTY
No data for Borno from NBS due to insurgency

The NBS recent report about poverty and inequality which was conducted from September 2018 to October 2019 put Nigeria's poverty rate at 40%. The report further explained that this figure represents a total of 82.9 million people who lived below poverty line of 137,430 naira ($381.75) per year in Nigeria. In other words, this number of people living in poverty suggests that, on the average, four out of every 10 individuals in Nigeria had real per capita expenditures below ₦137,430 per year (NBS, 2020). This report further indicated that 52% of people in rural areas lived in poverty while the poverty rate was just 18% in urban parts of the country. In terms of socioeconomic inequality among states in Nigeria, the report showed that Sokoto State, which was in the North-western part of the country, had the highest poverty rate of 87.7% compared to Lagos State, a commercial hub of the nation in the South-western region, which had the lowest poverty rate of 4.5% in the country and there was no data for Borno State from this NBS report due to insurgency during the period covered by the report. Additionally, Dauda (2017), asserted that:

> Poverty in Nigeria differs in pattern of many other countries given that even with economic growth recorded, poverty is still on increase with the North-West and North-East geopolitical zones leading in the poverty indices. This situation is at variance with the experiences of developing countries in Europe, America and Asia where economic growth results in poverty reduction. This lends credence to the long-standing assumption that the relationship among poverty, economic growth and development is not even. Pg 68.

From the above analysis, it is clear that large percentage of Nigerian population was living in poverty, long before the world Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic in February, 2020. The high level of poverty in Nigeria has been recognized by several successive government regimes, through implementation of various policies and programmes targeted at reducing poverty in the country. Though, government's approach and commitment toward tackling poverty usually appear credible, but modalities for implementation, policy inconsistencies, poor funding and corruption had always affected the expected outcome of reducing poverty rate in Nigeria (Aigbokhan, 2008; Arisi-Nwugballa, Elom, & Onyeizugbe, 2016)

Major Causes of Poverty in Nigeria since Independence

Besides ineffective leadership and poor governance: bribery, corruption, lack of vision and foresight had also contributed significantly to the current alarming rate of poverty in Nigeria. Khalid (2008) suggested that the leading causes of poverty in Nigeria are unemployment, ignorance, bad leadership, corruption, high inflation, environmental degradation and high population growth. Though, several factors have been earlier identified by many researchers as causes of persistent poverty in Nigeria. However, this present study considered the following three salient causes of poverty in Nigeria which include: bad leadership, corruption and illiteracy.

Bad Leadership: Leadership is defined "as a body of people who lead and direct the activities of a group towards a shared goal" (Ogbeidi, 2012). Generally, leadership has to do with ability to lead, direct and organize a group towards achieving a mutually shared goal. Development in any nation is a function of effective leadership disposition, because true leaders are selfless and they think more of their people as well as next generation. But in the last 60 years of Nigeria existence as an independent nation, the country has experienced several leadership challenges in terms of bad governance. According to Ijewereme and Dunmade (2014), since attainment of political independence in 1960, Nigeria has never been governed by truly transformational and selfless leaders. Transition from one weak and ineffective leader to another has remained a constant leadership experience in Nigeria. Ebegbulem, (2012) earlier stated that poor leadership and corruption had adversely affected Nigeria's democratic stability and her economic development. Leadership crisis in Nigeria has been characterized with: greediness, parochial interest, visionless, mission-less, mediocrity, high-handedness, unwilling to relinquish power, lopsided appointments, ethnic discrimination, corruption among others. Throughout the world, good governance is the hallmark of a responsible leader. Good governance always ensures that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable are heard in the decision-making over the allocation of resources

(Waziri, 2009). The United Nations Development Programme – UNDP defines governance as the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country' affairs at all levels. Lack of access to basic services such as: education, primary health care, electricity, pipe borne water, motorable roads, employment opportunities and security of live and property, which are prerequisites for effective human development with a whole lot of wide reaching effects on the citizenry had lend credence to poor leadership performances in the Nigeria. Additionally, lack of leadership transparency and accountability in managing the country's affairs are responsible for enormous pressures constantly mount on public office holders by several non-state actors, such as: civil society organization, media among others with a call to enhance peoples driven priority in managing the nation's affair and its resources. Good leadership cannot be achieved without proper attention to social inclusion. Good leaders encourage social inclusion in all aspects and bridges the gap between the leaders and the led to avoid a feeling of social discrimination among the citizens. For effective leadership performance, citizens are to be carried along in the various stages of policy planning, decision-making and implementation processes. This is because people, especially the downtrodden of society (the poor and the youth) are more likely to identify with policies they are part of, than those that are imposed on them by their leaders.

Corruption: Corruption has been part and parcel of most Nigerian leaders since the country got her independence in 1960. Though, there is no universal consensus on the definition of corruption. But the UN Global Programme against Corruption (GPAC) has defined it as "abuse of power or position for personal gain". Continuous abuse of power for personal gain has become a major characteristics of Nigerian leaders right from independence in 1960. The first military incursion into the business of governance in Nigeria in 1966 was blamed on several allegations of corrupt practices by the then civilian government of Tafawa Balewa. Ejimabo, (2013) stated that the young military officers who staged the first *coup* in 1966, maintained that the military was compelled to oust the civilian regime in order to end corruption and maladministration. Since the time of first Nigeria civilian regime till today, the rate of corruption has remained worrisome and unabated. According to Aluko (2002) corruption has a long history in Nigeria but its gradual popularity is due to the unimaginable records of consistent corrupt practices that mostly common among the country's political class, government officials as well as civil servants. In Nigeria, people perpetrate corruption in different forms and through different channels such as: financial misappropriation, financial mismanagement, looting of common treasury, money laundering, over-inflation of contracts, ghost workers, bribery among others (Ijewereme and Dunmade, 2014). Corruption is not only rampant among government officials but it also exists in every other sector of the nation's economy, in which the private sector and religious bodies are not exempted. In view of high rate of corruption in Nigeria, Danaan (2018) stated that, "there tends to be no accountability in public and community service. Greed and selfishness seem to be embedded in the psyche of an average Nigerian in leadership position and funds meant for development are mismanaged and embezzled by corrupt government officials." In the same vein, Adebayo (2013) earlier asserted that corruption strongly aggravates poverty, by eating up funds that would have otherwise been used to rescue a lot of vulnerable people from the pain of starvation and economic powerlessness, as it excessively pulls scarce resources from the national treasuries (money meant for economic development) into the bank accounts of a few politically powerful individuals. Similarly, Aleyomi, (2013) suggested that "corruption has taught many Nigerians wrong lessons, that it does not pay to be honest, hardworking, dependable and law abiding because the culture has legalized illegality in the society". In fact, it is worrisome to note that the situation has degenerated to the extent that getting a corrupt-free Nigerian is almost impossible (Dike, 2003).

As a result of persistent corrupt practices in Nigeria, several funds meant for developmental programmes and projects targeted at ameliorating the challenges of vulnerable people are usually squandered. High rate of corruption has equally hindered the effective provision of basic amenities such as: construction of roads, schools, hospitals and others. It is obvious that where fund meant for provision of public projects cannot be completely looted by government officials in charge, the common practice is to embark on the use of substandard and inferior materials in executing the projects, with aim of making huge profit. Meanwhile, many public projects with such structural deficit do not last long before becoming dilapidated and the painful aspect of such experience is that, the vulnerable people are usually the one who bear the brunt of such failed projects. Few among these corruption-based failed projects include several poorly constructed township roads by many Local Government elected office holders. Recently in Nigeria, these types of projects are not limited to a particular local government area but it rather spread across the entire length and breadth of the country. A common feature of such poorly constructed roads is that they hardly last up to two years before becoming death traps with several failed portion and dangerous potholes that commonly constitute maximum inconveniences for every road users. Another easily found failed projects handled by these greedy Nigerian politicians include poorly constructed borehole water supplies in both rural and urban areas. These types of boreholes usually become the only source of portable water supply for a large percentage of the citizens, as pipe borne water is nowhere to be found in many part of the country. It is however worrisome that majority of these borehole water supplies, despite their importance to the living condition of the residents, usually stop working in less than a year after their initial installations that commonly come with an elaborate political commissioning ceremony. Whereas, it is highly understandable that if these public projects are properly handled with standard materials that meet the contract specifications, there is no doubt that they would significantly reduce the suffering of most vulnerable Nigerians who are living in poverty. Ejimabo, (2013) claimed that, regardless of where corruption occurs, the individual or group involved and what causes it or the form it takes, the facts still remain that in Nigeria, corruption has contributed immensely to greed, mistrust, insecurity and injustice, as well as to the poverty and the misery of a large segment of the nation's population.

Illiteracy: Despite several efforts made by the Nigerian government since independence to tackle high rate of illiteracy in the country, through provision of access to formal education by establishing more primary, secondary and tertiary schools across the nation, coupled with the provision of free education, scholarship, as well as provision of free learning materials, it is unexpected to discover that illiteracy level still remains high in the country. One of the most disturbing channels through which illiteracy has been contributing to the high rate of poverty, is the fact that many Nigerians are committed to raising large number of children through multiple wives. This idea of raising many children in the family usually brings about high financial demand that constantly go beyond the capacity of such family to properly care for the children. These forms of family structures have direct implication on the country's population growth. Ordinarily, population growth supposed to be a blessing for the country's socio-economic development. Because a healthy population is an economic asset since the assured supply of a strong and healthy labour force is an essential factor of social change and development, (Olowa, 2012). But in the case of Nigeria, this unregulated population growth has adversely affected the few available infrastructural facilities, because of poor national planning and lack of adequate developmental projects on the part of government to meet the country's continuous population demands. Even where some amenities are provided, especially in the urban areas, such public facilities are constantly overstretched by sudden population explosion usually springing out of the vulnerable population zone.

Consequently, high rate of illiteracy in the country has undoubtedly made large percentage of Nigerian youth unemployable. This is because employment opportunities can only be secured by suitably qualified individuals. By implication, every youth without a required academic qualification or vocational training will not be able to secure any profitable job that can improve their living condition and enhance their standard of living. Therefore, high rate of illiteracy had equally encouraged the development of bad leadership, because many greedy leaders easily manipulated their ways for personal financial enrichment at the expense of the general population, by taking undue advantage of this illiterate bloc of the population, who lack basic knowledge about their fundamental rights, let alone being able to defend them.

The Outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria

The outbreak of novel COVID-19 pandemic that is ravaging the entire world has undoubtedly caused serious health challenges with adverse effect on world economy and its attendant hardship on individual's income, particularly the vulnerable people in all developing countries including Nigeria. According to Buheji *et al.*, (2020) most times, the vulnerable people are commonly and unsurprisingly the worst hit by any kind of natural or human induced difficulties like famine, diseases, war, riots, and others. It is obvious that any interruption in the daily socioeconomic activities of this set of people, usually results into an unrecoverable economic and financial losses. This is so because, the informal sector, which provides means of living and livelihood for the majority of people in Nigeria, is characterized by day-to-day social-economic activities that always involve close social contacts among different categories of people, such as: buyers and sellers in open and crowded market places, hawkers on major streets, commercial bus drivers, tricycle and motorcycle operators, bricklayers, carpenters, welders, fashion designers, hair dressers, barbers, as well as other categories of artisans.

Coronavirus which is also known as COVID-19 is a respiratory viral infection that primarily transmits from human-to-human through droplets from an infected person or through contact with the virus-contaminated environment (Rahman, & Abdullah, 2020). The first case of coronavirus disease was reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The common symptoms of coronavirus disease are: dry cough, fever, shortness of breath, headache, sore throat, runny nose, muscle and chest pain, vomiting and loss of taste and smell. As a result of high rate of transmission, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared coronavirus illness a pandemic in February, 2020. But due to the lack of vaccine or any curative medicine to treat coronavirus infection, the WHO recommended the following non-pharmaceutical guidelines as preventive measures: social distancing, use of face mask, regular hand washing, avoidance of crowded place, ban on large gathering and the use of hand sanitizer among others, as a means of curbing the spread of the virus.

In Nigeria, the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic came as a contributing factor to the existing high rate of poverty, characterized by fragile socioeconomic condition among large number of vulnerable people in the country. The negative economic impact of this virus was further escalated by government's decision to protect public health interest. The implementation of such decision on public health interest necessitated Nigerian government to enforce public compliance with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) COVID-19 health precautionary guidelines, which include: social distancing, socioeconomic lockdown, imposition of curfew, ban on large gathering, mandatory use of face mask and sensitization on regular hand washing among others (NCDC, 2020). Although, these measures are medically reasonable at curbing the further spread of the virus. At the same time, these preventive measures are equally capable of worsening the already weakened economic condition of those in the informal sector. The Nigerian informal sector is largely dominated by vulnerable people who usually have no financial backing to fall back into, during any difficult/challenging period like the current COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, this vulnerable people constantly base their live and livelihood on their daily earnings. Buheji *et al*., (2020) affirmed that people in this category (that is, the vulnerable people) are the most affected by the current pandemic worldwide.

In Nigeria, the first COVID-19 index case was recorded on the 27th of February, 2020, in Lagos State (NCDC, 2020) and instantly, the Nigerian government set up a Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 (saddled with the responsibilities of daily briefing on COVID-19 updates and to recommend necessary steps that would help in curbing the spread of the virus). This action was followed by a directive for the closure of all schools in the country. Again, the Federal Government further decided to invoke the Quarantine Act, which allows the Federal Government to order partial or total lockdown of social and economic activities in any part of the country. This decision was part of attempts to ensure due process in all government responses at curbing the spread of the novel COVID-19 health challenges in the country. After a month of the first index case in Nigeria, there was a recorded increase in the number of daily confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections. In view of this development, both the PTF and NCDC recommended the need to lockdown the economic activities in some parts of the country that were regarded as COVID-19 red zones. Therefore, on the 28th of March, 2020, the Federal Government of Nigeria announced the first partial lockdown of social and economic activities in Lagos State, Ogun State and Abuja (the nation's Federal Capital Territory) (NCDC, 2020). The president also directed all civil servants nationwide to stay at home during the lockdown, except those on essential services. The initial lockdown was meant for only 14 days, while other states aside Lagos and Ogun were advised to individually respond to COVID-19 health crisis as considered appropriate, based on the severity of the virus in terms of the number of confirmed cases of the infection in their domains.

After the first 14 days of the initial lockdown, the NCDC confirmed a spike in the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections (NCDC, 2020). This development was responsible for the Federal Government's decision to extend the lockdown for another 14 days and also went further to include Kano State among the states to be covered by the extended lockdown. The inclusion of Kano State was linked to the high rate of some mysterious deaths that occurred in that state during the first phase of the lockdown, which claimed about 640 lives. Though, after thorough investigation into the immediate and remote causes of those mysterious deaths, the reports from the Kano State Ministry of Health showed that, most of the deaths were caused by complications arising from hypertension, diabetes, meningitis and acute malaria, (Nwozor, Okolie, Okidu, & Oshewolo, 2020). At the end of the second phase of the partial lockdown and in consideration of economic hardship experienced by the citizens, most especially the vulnerable people. The Federal Government announced a gradual ease of the lockdown. However, at the same time, the state governors became curious and more concerned about the likely inter-state spread of the virus due to the continuous spike in the NCDC daily confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections, together with the official report that the virus was already at the community transmission stage. Therefore, in order to prevent possible interstate spread of the virus, on the 23rd of April, 2020, all the 36 state governors, under the umbrella of Nigerian Governors' Forum (NGF), unanimously endorsed ban on all forms of inter-state movements across the country, except for medical personnel and people on essential services, such as: security agents, pharmaceutical dealers as well as food and drinks vendors (Nwozor, Okolie, Okidu, & Oshewolo, 2002).

The Nigeria Governors' Forum inter-state lockdown was the third phase of social and economic lockdown, occasioned by COVID-19 pandemic in the country. It is painful to note that the combination of those different phases of lockdown almost lasted a period of 3 months at a stretch. However, the adverse effects of such prolonged closure of economic activities, especially among the vulnerable people, who usually live a day at a time, are nothing but excruciating life experience that cannot be quickly erased from their long-term memories. The unambiguous understanding of resultant economic hardship emanated from such lockdown, necessitated the government decision on several COVID-19 palliative measures, specifically aimed at cushioning the economic effects among the vulnerable people in Nigeria. Among such government's COVID-19 palliatives are: distribution of grains and other non-perishable food items to the vulnerable households in Nigeria, approval for the payment of two months stipend of conditional cash transfer to all vulnerable people on the national social register, directive to increase the number of vulnerable people on national social register from 2.6 million to 3.6million, regular payment of salary to all categories of civil/public servant who stayed at home due to COVID-19 pandemic, including those on strike, in order to have financial resources needed to take care of their dependents among whom are vulnerable people, as well as the approval of ₦50 billion COVID-19 economic stimulus fund by the Central Bank of Nigeria, (Ejiogu, Okechukwu, & Ejiogu, 2020). The COVID-19 palliative measures are among several government programmes and policies targeted at alleviating poverty among the large population of the vulnerable people in Nigeria due to the economic hardship occasioned by COVID-19.

Major Programmes Targeted at Vulnerable People before COVID-19 Outbreak in Nigeria.

Nigeria has a long history of government proprammes and policies targeted at ameliorating poverty and eradicating hunger among the vulnerable people. According to Danaan (2018):

> Some of notable poverty reduction programmes in Nigeria are: Operation Feed the Nation, Free and Compulsory Primary Education, Green Revolution, Low Cost Housing, River Basin Development Authority, Structural Adjustment Programme National Agricultural Land Development Authority, Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme, Strategic Grain Reserves Programme, Rural Electrification Scheme, Family Economic Advancement Programme, Better life for Rural Women, Family Support Programme, National Directorate of Employment, Mass Transit Programme,

Guinea Worm Eradicating Programme, Petroleum Trust Fund, National Poverty Eradication Programme and National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy pg 21.

Though, most of these programmes appeared credible in terms of their policy formulations and mandates, but they all failed to achieve their main objective of reducing poverty, despite the huge budgetary allocations consistently earmarked for the successful implementation of the programmes, none of them had produced the required result, as they were haphazardly executed and usually ended up in total failure, due to corruption, lack of transparency and non-accountability. Karimu, & Muhammad (2017), further pointed out that money allocated to assist unemployed Nigerians through the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) ended up in the pockets of the managers of the agency.

However, in the year 2016, the Federal Government came up with the establishment of another form of poverty eradication programme tagged National Social Investment Programmes (N-SIPs). The central focus of these programmes is to ensure equal distribution of resources to the vulnerable population with specific attention on children, youths, women and elder people. It has been suggested that "if Nigeria is to achieve the goal of being a top economy by year 2030, there is a need for strategic plan to support the most vulnerable in the society to catalyze productivity, especially among the youthful workforce (N-SIO, 2018). Specifically, under this social investment initiative, there are four major components. These key components include: **N-Power Programme:** Which is a job creation and youth empowerment programme of the Federal Government of Nigeria to tackle the problem of high rate of youth unemployment and improve economic productivity. Youth unemployment is among the major socio-economic challenges in Nigeria, and it is obvious that young people who stay unemployed for a long time usually find it harder to get jobs and may begin to feel dejected (N-SIO, 2018). The aim of N-Power is to imbibe the learn-work-entrepreneurship culture in Nigerian youths who are between the ages of 18 and 35years. The scheme is a continuous empowerment programme designed to operate in batches, in which, each batch is expected to last for a maximum period of 2 years and eligibility includes both graduates and non-graduates. **National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme:** This is the second component of N-SIPs. According to United Nations Children's Fund - UNICEF (2015) report, Nigeria has a total number of 13.2 million out-of-school children, which is the highest rate in the world. This development necessitated the creation of National Home Grown School Feeding Programme and based on its policy recommendation, the programme was designed to provide one nutritious balanced meal per each school day, to at least 5.5 million pupils in classes 1 to 3 across Nigeria public primary schools in order to mop-up the huge numbers of out-of-school children in the country, as well as solving the problem of early year malnutrition. **National Cash Transfer Programme:** This is the third component of N-SIPs and it was designed to provide targeted monthly cash transfers of ₦5,000 to poor and vulnerable households, with the main focus of graduating the beneficiaries out of poverty. Additional segment of this initiative is to provide continuous support, mentoring and coaching for the beneficiaries to form savings groups. **Government Enterprises and Empowerment Programme:** This is the fourth component of the N-SIPs initiative and was set up with the aim of providing micro lending to a minimum of 1.66 million businesses that operate at the bottom of the financial pyramid. The targeted business operators in this category include: traders, women cooperatives, market women, enterprising youths, farmers and agricultural workers.

It is not surprising that the public appraisal of these social investment programmes since establishment in the year 2016 had received both commendations and condemnations from members of the public. Meanwhile, the position of most government officials is that, the programmes had significantly produced required positive results in terms of achieving its official mandates of reducing poverty among the vulnerable Nigerians. Contrarily, the perception of the members of the general public indicated that the programmes are poorly implemented and therefore served as an avenue for corrupt Nigerian politicians to siphon the public scarce recourses, instead of being a platform to genuinely tackle the current alarming rate of poverty in a sincere, transparent and sustainable way.

The Rate of Poverty during and after COVID-19

Several studies had reported adverse effect of COVID-19 on poverty status and socioeconomic conditions of vulnerable people in Nigeria, particularly during this COVID-19 pandemic that is currently ravaging the entire world with severe impact on global economy. A report by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020) indicated that more than 37% of households experienced an increase in prices of major food products, (such as; rice, beans, garri, semovital, bread among others), and almost 12% of these households confirmed a reduction in their food consumption, as a means of managing the impact of price shocks during COVID-19 outbreak. This report was a direct confirmation of the earlier projection by the World Food Programme, which predicted that, COVID-19 will double the number of households experiencing serious food crises except a drastic step is taken. In a similar report, data from the World Poverty Clock indicated that 50% of the Nigeria population or 102.1 million people are presently living in poverty due the impact of coronavirus on the country's economy. The NBS report of 2018 showed that, before COVID-19 pandemic, the country's unemployment rate stood at 23.1%. Unfortunately, the outbreak of COVID-19 has worsened the situation as more than 40% of Nigerians employed in non-agricultural enterprises (such as: private school teachers, hotel attendants, restaurant workers, bankers, practitioners in the movie industry.) sadly lost their jobs between April and May 2020. In Nigeria, several studies on COVID-19 and rate of poverty during the pandemic affirmed a significant adverse effect of the pandemic among vulnerable people. But, attempt to ascertain the exact rate of poverty after COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria appears impossible at the present, because the virus is still ravaging the country's economy at the time of this present study. However, it is obvious that COVID-19 pandemic has seriously contributed to the current high rate of poverty especially among the vulnerable population in the country.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted key informant interview as a means of primary data collection to complement the secondary data collected through integrative review of previous studies. A sample of 116 participants (68 males and 52 females) was selected through a convenient sampling method to participate in the key informant interview. This interview was conducted among artisans and low cadre employees in the formal sector, but who operate at the lower rung of the economic pyramid in the country. These participants comprised: fashion designers, bricklayers, carpenters, commercial motor drivers, welders, private school teachers, petrol station attendants, hotel attendants, petty traders and private security guards. The participants cut across two states of Ekiti and Osun, which are both in the South-western part of the country. Of the 116 participants, 74 were selected from Osun state while the remaining 42 participants were selected from Ekiti State. The ages of the participants ranged between 26 and 54years.

Method of Data Collection

For data collection procedure, each of the selected participants was contacted at their individual's place of working, to seek their consent to participate in the study. After meeting them in their place of work, details of the study procedures were explained to them in a clear and an unambiguous manner. Once expressed their readiness to participate in the study, the structured interview prepared for the study was conducted. Out of 345 artisans who were contacted for the interview, only 116 expressed their readiness to participate in the interview. The refusal of majority of these artisans to participate in the study was attributed to their tight-work-schedules, which did not allow them to spare almost 20 minutes that was required to answer the interview questions.

Table 1: Impact of Covid-19 Outbreak on Income

S/N	Statements	YES	NO
1	My monthly income is below ₦30,000	104	12
2	My perceived socioeconomic status is very low	98	18
3	My monthly income was badly affect during COVID-19	112	04
4	My monthly income remained stable during COVID-19	24	92
5	I was able to make more income during COVID-19	08	108
6	The children in my household were not eating enough food because we just could not afford it due to COVID-19.	96	20
7	We constantly ration food in my family during COVID-19	100	16
8	We eat what we want 3 times a day before and during COVID-19	48	68
9	My household only eat to survive due to COVID-19	85	31
10	My family members maintained standard balance diets during COVID-19.	12	104
11	I don't want the Nigeria economy to be lockdown again	112	04
12	I pray the pandemic is over on time	114	02

Results and Discussion

Descriptive analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected in this study. Descriptive analysis is a basic tool that is widely used to analyse and interpret primary and/ or secondary data. Finding in this study shows that 98.6% of the participants claimed that they received less than ₦30,000 per month. This implies that people in this category are living below the international poverty line of $381.75 per year and therefore, they are regarded as part of vulnerable people in the country. The finding further shows that 95.6% of the participants claimed that their monthly income was badly affected during COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria, while only 14.4% stated their income remained stable during COVID-19 outbreak. This may be due to the fact their different means of generating income mostly through day-to-day socio-economic activities were negatively affected by COVID-19 economic challenges. Additionally, 82.7% of the participants disclosed that, children in their household were not eating enough food because they could not just afford it due to COVID-19 outbreak. The unpalatable financial hardship occasioned by COVID-19 pandemic has made it so difficult for many families in Nigeria (especially the vulnerable ones) to properly feed their family members with good, nutritious and balance diet. Most of the families in this category are only eating to survive by depending largely on starchy foods (like yam, garri, fufu, semovita, rice and maize) for their survival. The finding in this study further shows that only 10.3% of the participants disclosed that their family members maintain standard balance diets during COVID-19. This figure is not encouraging, as lack of good nutrition and balance diet can cause severe health challenges among children. Furthermore, 96.6% of the participants indicated that they don't want the Nigeria economy to be lockdown again. This means that majority of vulnerable people were not comfortable with the previous COVID-19 lockdown and are not interested in passing through another lockdown in the country.

Implications of the Study

Many countries across the global community are currently facing unprecedented health and economic challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and Nigeria and her people are no exception. COVID-19 pandemic is generally regarded as a serious global health challenge. But in Nigeria, the financial difficulty experienced by the vulnerable people due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic is more excruciating and disturbing than the widely publicized associated health challenges. Poverty and pandemic were identified as major sources of economic and social hardship currently confronting the large population of vulnerable people in Nigeria. The outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria has undoubtedly worsened the socioeconomic condition of most vulnerable people in the country. This is mostly due to the fact that their lives and means of livelihood that depend on their day-to-day socio-economic activities had been adversely affected by the COVID-19 precaution measures which include: lockdown of economic activities, ban on social gathering among others.

The current additional economic hardship that emanated from COVID-19 pandemic experienced by the vulnerable people (that currently constitutes country's poverty zone) has significantly contributed to the high rate of poverty in Nigeria. It has become obvious that the current alarming rate of poverty in Nigeria requires more drastic efforts on the part of the government to tackle the menace possibly by creating more pro-poor people programmes that will be grounded on transparency, accountability and sincerity of purpose on the part of government. Considering the failure of several social investment programmes in the past, special initiatives that are specifically targeted at vulnerable population and carefully implemented with genuine leadership passion can only reduce the economic hardship and financial suffering of most vulnerable Nigerians who presently operate far below international poverty line of $381.75 per year.

Discussions in this study partly emanated from deep theoretical review of relevant previous studies coupled with information gathered through key informant interview of some conveniently selected participants. This approach of data collection can be further strengthened by adopting other primary data collection methods such as: focus group discussion (FGD) as well as survey method through which large number of questionnaires can be used to increase the sample size of the study. Future researchers are encouraged to adopt other methods of primary data collection for more elaborate findings in their studies. Again, this present study was unable to ascertain the rate of poverty in Nigeria after COVID-19 as the pandemic is still ravaging the nation's economy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concluded that poverty is not only rampant but is also operating at a very high rate in Nigeria. This study further reveals that the current economic hardship experienced by vulnerable people in the country has taken a new dimension, largely due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Though, COVID-19 pandemic is regarded as a serious global health challenge, but its attendant socioeconomic impact has higher adverse effect on the living conditions of the entire vulnerable population in Nigeria. This is specifically caused by the negative effect of the outbreak on their day-to-day social and economic activities which characterized their means of livelihood. The recent increase in the poverty status among vulnerable Nigerians actually affirmed the earlier claim by Buheji *et al.,* (2020) that vulnerable people are usually at the receiving end of any natural or artificially-induced disasters, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Across the world, introduction of social investment programmes is among the most popular approaches to poverty alleviation prorammes toward vulnerable people. But the complete failure of several previous social investment programmes in Nigeria calls for a more drastic and aggressive actions on the part of Nigerian government, in order to significantly tackle the high rate of poverty in the country. Furthermore, there is a need to establish additional pro-poor people programmes, which should be handled by professionals that possess unquestionable characters, together with necessary legal backings for its effectiveness and that will be targeted at the vulnerable people with the aim of gradually graduating them out of the poverty zone, and thereby reducing the high rate of poverty in the country as well as facilitating the expected national growth and development that Nigerians desired.

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