

Poverty Reduction, Unemployment and Rural Development: Aftermath of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria has one of the countries whose experience of poverty and unemployment is on the high side makes this study to look into the effect of the economic lockdown during the global pandemic in the country, with the aim of making effort on how this effect can be translated into economic development. Survey research design method was adopted with self-administered questionnaire used to collect data. Findings revealed that in Nigeria COVID -19 outbreak effects was felt in almost all sectors and the aftermath greatly affected the country's GDP and this adversely affect rural development in the country, which translated to a worrisome rate of poverty and unemployment. Hence, both individual and government have now seen that campaigning for economic diversification is not sufficient for economic development but rather a prompt swing into action by all is needed for sustainable development of rural areas to respond to the worrisome rate of unemployment and in turn high level of poverty caused by the COVID-19 lockdown in the country. It was recommended that government at all level as well as individuals and stakeholders should put in place actions that would gear up rural development and set policies at their various helms of affairs that would encourage economic participation of all citizens in all sector of the economy.

Keywords: *Poverty, Unemployment, Rural development, COVID-19*

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Background to the Study

In December 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic, having registered the effects this contagious virus has caused across the globe. The virus which emanated from Asian countries led to the total lockdown of all (social and economic) activities in all countries affected to curb its spread. Before WHO pronounced it has a global epidemic, Nigerians saw the disease as a foreign land infection that could never spread to the country and this affected the response to its confirmation in the country. Despite the rate of spread of COVID -19 in the country, many believed it was a disease for the high class citizens. High rate of poverty and unemployment with (stagnation in) development of rural areas are inherent characteristics of developing nations which has always been considered by researchers over the years, all with the aim to tackle development challenges. Weak progress on structural changes and low spending on research and development accounts for the deterred economic growth in developing countries. The rural poor in middle- and low-income countries will be particularly at risk (with the COVID-19 aftermath) due to the depth of their poverty, high population numbers, reduced remittances and the limited capacity of the state to respond (Ocampo, 2020). Even the G20 Leaders, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank Group and the UN Secretary General, are all of the opinion that poor people and poorer countries are particularly at risk as a result of the pandemic.

The consequences of COVID-19 disease outbreak on the economy of Nigeria have gradually started unfolding. According to Woodhill (2020), the health and economic impact are likely to be felt more by the world's poorest people. This pandemic experienced all over the world in the year 2020 affected the job of many citizens (there was job creation and job loss), this resulted in reduction or loss of incomes to individuals, firms and government, thereby having a widespread impact on people's financial resources to the extent that acquiring even basic needs such as purchase of food became difficult for the poor citizens. One of the ways the economic effect was reflected is through the inability of government to fulfill her rural development plan in the year 2020, this would likely be the situation in the next few years due to economic aftermath of COVID-19 caused by the direct and indirect impacts (like shortfalls in government revenue) of the lockdown policy. To assess the economic impact of the lockdown, consideration has to be given to gross national product (GDP) as well as the number of people living below the international poverty line.

In Nigeria, the government has given development of rural communities' utmost priority over the years because most economic diversification options such as agriculture can be enroot through rural development. In most developing nation about 70% of the population lives in the rural areas and almost all of them still live in extreme poverty, buttressing the fact that the negative effect of COVID-19 would be felt more by low class citizens. According to Ocampo (2020), the economic effect of the pandemic is most likely to initially increase poverty level in the country thereby hindering poverty reduction strategy. Ocampo (2020), also stated that, actions need to be taken in areas such as trade, finance and tax corporations to put the global economy on a more suitable path. Another severe socio economic impact of COVID-19 which has greatly affected the Nigerian economy is the sharp drop in oil prices, which threatened to undo years of moderate economic growth in Nigeria and many other oil-dependent African countries (IMF, 2020a).

The socio-economic effect of COVID-19 in Nigeria and the world at large requires attention being given to strategy, business, people, risk and operations generally. This is because the disease outbreak has a significant influence on; business operations, health care systems, recession, lives and properties. Before the pandemic, the increase in the rate of unemployment and even underemployment in Nigeria contribute a lot to why poverty level is on the high side in the country and now the effect of this disease outbreak experienced all over the world has affected the job structure or nature of many citizens. While to some the experience has been job loss and to some others especially those endowed with Information Technology (IT) knowledge, it has being an opportunity for job creation as IT was the most reasonable means of communicating during the lockdown. But quite a number of Nigerian citizens lost their jobs due to the lock down, this resulted in reduction or loss of income thereby having a widespread impact on people's financial resources to acquire even basic needs such as purchase food. Though the lock down effect on jobs was felt by both the employers and employees it however opened the mind of many to the reason to look into diversifying their means of earning and likewise other creativity in them where geared-up by the lockdown.

The COVID-19 lockdown had a great impact on Nigeria economy and this has caused the rate of unemployment, poverty and rural development to worsen with a prediction of the situation getting worse in the future. It is not an under-statement to say that the experience brought by the pandemic in the year 2020 has shown the need for all nations to plan appropriately for the future. Hence, critical future insights are more important than ever especially in a developing country like Nigeria. This study therefore intends to look into the effects of the economic lockdown during the global pandemic on the Nigerian society, with the aim of making effort on how these effects can be translated into economic development while other objectives of this study are to know the impact of rural development on poverty reduction, investigating the effects of rural development in curbing unemployment and examining the relationship between unemployment and poverty reduction.

Review of Related Literature

The arrival of the pandemic set off a chain of policy actions, including public health and education campaigns, fiscal and monetary measures, restrictions on large sections of the economy, and compensating measures in the form of social protection for poor and vulnerable people (Onyekwena and Amara Mma, 2020). The Economist Intelligence Unit warns that COVID-19 outbreak will be the most brutal recession in living memory that “could devastate poor countries”.

Impact of Rural Development on Poverty Reduction

The various control measures imposed by government during the lockdown in addition to restrictions in movement, led to the incidence of increase in the prices of goods and services, lack of food, restriction from accessing basic need such as shelters. Increases in the prices of goods and services are due to scarcity of resources, low supply and high demand, which led to inflation. Various researches have suggested that Nigeria economy requires economic diversification and development of rural areas is a good means through which this can be achieved.

Given the adverse outcomes of the pandemic, a pressing economic policy concern is to find ways to reduce the negative consequences of lower household income, higher poverty, and the greater likelihood of associated long-term impacts, such as deeper rates of malnutrition. In the short-term, while the focus has been on health, security, and the welfare of vulnerable population groups, the government has provided food from the national grain reserve and advanced payments of conditional cash transfers [(FAO, 2020; FGN, 2020a) as cited by ACAPS (2020); Nnabuife, 2020].

As stated by (UNHCR, 2020), the impact of the lockdown reduced family interactions (57.61%) whereby keeping the core family members only with no possibility of visiting relatives. The stressful situations caused by the restriction could stimulate mental and emotional disorder, particularly among households with poor income. The COVID-19 economic challenge requires a good foresight thinking to prepare for how shorter-term impacts of the lockdown will unfold, also to look at what await the economy in the future as well as how to ensure the best is made out of the situation such as vast investments that will be made to help recovery can contribute to a more equitable and sustainable society. Inequity and unsustainable resources use and climate change impact disproportionately on poor rural people and small-scale farmers. COVID-19 needs to be a wake-up call for creating systems that are far more resilient to shocks such as the current pandemic (UNHCR, 2020).

Slow down in rural development is also expected due to the fact that the cash flow and profits of firms have dropped substantially putting many, particular small and medium sized enterprises, at risk of financial default. This has a spiraling negative impact on the economy with flow-on effects to the financial sector and the availability of credit (Woodhill, 2020). Economic fallout from the crash in oil prices and the economic effects of COVID-19 would worsen poverty and economic inequalities in the country. Prior to the pandemic the Nigerian economy was characterized by slow growth, high inflation rates and currency fluctuation, and high levels of poverty (Daily Trust 20/05/2020 as cited by ACAPS, 2020).

About 15% of the world's poorest reside in Nigeria; urban crime, kidnappings, and herder-pastoralist clashes are widespread in some areas due to poverty, limited resources, and lack of economic opportunities. There is a risk that the economic impact of COVID-19 will exacerbate insecurity (The New Humanitarian 15/05/2020; Chatham House 12/05/2020 as cited by ACAPS, 2020). A study on remittances conducted in Nigeria between 2011 and 2012 found that over 74% of the total remittances flows to the country were spent by households on consumption, education and health (Progress in Development Studies 12/2014; IFAD 2011 as cited by ACAPS, 2020). Decline of remittances to Nigeria will probably lead to increased poverty and reduced access to essential goods and services (The World Bank 04/2020 as cited by ACAPS, 2020). Nigeria is the biggest oil exporter in Africa and the largest gas reserves in the continent, with the huge reserves of both human and natural resources, Nigeria is expected to build a rich and comfortable economy, reduce its poverty level significantly and be able to provide infrastructural services to cater for its population need (World Bank, 2014).

The dependent of the country on the oil sector have not helped to bring up development as expected especially to rural areas. It is therefore important that putting in place some factors which would aid the development of the rural areas in Nigeria should be given priority. Therefore, it is important to note that the impact of COVID-19 on the rural poor needs to be given attention especially with the economic, livelihoods, health and food security implications in the short, medium and longer term.

Effect of Rural Development in Curbing Unemployment

ACAPS (2020) stated that, oil revenues contribute 60% of the government's revenue and 90% of its foreign revenue. The recent global crash in oil prices, fuelled by an OPEC+ price war and subsequent drop in demand of oil derivatives amid COVID-19 containment measures worldwide, resulted in Nigeria reducing its oil production and exports. Depletion of foreign reserves in the Nigerian Central Bank (normally countries get foreign currency from exports to replenish their reserves) has made it difficult to stabilize the local currency (Naira) against the US dollar, causing a rapid depreciation of the Naira (ODI 07/04/2020 as cited by ACAPS, 2020).

The UN Refugee Agency- UNHCR (2020) as part of the prevention and mitigation measures in response to the pandemic explained that there were wide ranging restrictions to movement and closure of socio-economic institutions and infrastructure across the country, leading to reduction of access to services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report indicated that access to education was the most impacted (at 62%) resulting from the country wide closure of schools and educational institutions. It is more like a shame that it was difficult during the lockdown for online schooling to be conducted in a country that is referred to as the giant of Africa. This explains that effective management of resources to coordinate various sectors like education is important. If resources has been effectively utilized before the pandemic lockdown the education sector would have not suffered that much. The situation to people in the rural areas would be worse because most members of these communities are actually being encouraged enroll in school through sensitization that it is an expenses that worth it in a future date even though their income seems to be low to cater for educational expenses as believed by them.

Analysis have projected that due to the sharp reduction in national GDP as a result of the lockdown, Nigeria is likely to experience recession. During an 8-weeks period in the lockdown the country's GDP reduced by about 23% and just as the global projection, a reduction of about 6% to 9% compared to the expected level of GDP before the COVID-19 outbreak was estimated for the second half of the year 2020 in Nigeria (see IMF, 2020b; World Bank, 2020a). The Nigeria poverty rate was also estimated to increase by 9% with the majority remaining poor till the end of 2020. The 2016 recession was the first in 25 years, and while painful, it amounted to a relatively manageable contraction of about 1.6% of GDP (World Bank, 2019). During the lockdown the agricultural sector was exempted from the lockdown policy, yet there was a prediction of a reduction in the agric-food production which was estimated to be about 11% as at the end of 2020.

The rural areas are where certain occupations like farming, fishing, mining, which serves as major options for economic diversification in Nigeria in order to reduce the country's dependence on oil can take place. The unemployment rate in the country could be addressed through rural development by provision of amenities that would encourage citizens to engage in different sectors (like mining, fishing, farming) that present job opportunities.

Relating Unemployment and Poverty Rate

Aside unemployment (brought about by the lockdown) that has contributed to the increased poverty rate, the value of the Nigeria currency also had its own impact. The high rate of poverty in Nigeria has been connected in the past to mismanagement of the economy as well as frequent changes in economic and social policies due to frequent change in government. When citizens are gainfully employed, it reduces the poverty level experienced in an economy, but the pandemic has made a lot of citizens especially the low-level workers to lose their jobs. This coupled with the devaluation of Nigeria's currency due to lockdown, has reduced the purchasing power of the citizen, making the low-income earners to be at more disadvantage. Woodhill (2020) stated that at the very least the current crisis will lead to increased poverty levels in the short term and hamper longer-term poverty reduction ambitions. Akwara, Akwara, Enwuchola, Adekunle, and Udaw, (2013), said unemployment was critical in the 1980s and has ever since been on the rise in Nigeria. The figure of 20% unemployed from the nation's work force in 2011 was up from 15% in 2008 (Lamido, 2013). People facing this challenge are the youth of Nigeria who up till date constituted the highest unemployment rate. Between the ages of 18 and 45 years old constitute about 40% to 60% unemployed in Nigeria (Akwara, et al, 2013).

The informal workers are particularly vulnerable to the negative economic effects of movement restrictions and social distancing measures. The depreciation of the Naira did not seem to have an immediate impact on inflation (Petroleum Economist 24/03/2020 as stated by ACAPS (2020)). Movement restrictions together with lockdown measures have decreased trade (import, export, and inter-state trade) and caused business closures, leading to higher prices for goods and services, unemployment, and loss of incomes. Higher transaction costs for trade of essential goods caused by movement restrictions and continued currency devaluation, following the global decline of oil prices, will likely result in a continued increase in prices and decreased households' purchasing power (FEWS NET 04/2020 cited by ACAPS, 2020).

The informal sector accounts for 80% of employment in Nigeria (ILO 2018 cited by ACAPS, 2020). There is often no record of informal workers; consequently, they are less likely to be protected by labour laws or included in social protection programmes. Informal workers often rely on daily work and payments are received in cash. 72.3% of all people employed in the informal sector in Nigeria are poor (ILO 2018). Poor households are unlikely to have savings, assets, or mechanisms that would enable them to cope with the sudden loss of income and economic shock caused by COVID-19 containment measures (ACAPS 2020). The informal sectors that could help to tackle economic diversification (to create employment in order to solve the problem of poverty) could be found in the rural areas, hence the need for the development of rural areas.

Methodology

To collect data for this study, descriptive survey research design was adopted and a questionnaire was distributed to a sample size of 250 selected randomly from 50 local communities in the Southwest States in Nigeria. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS (SPSS version 21 for Windows). Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation) was used to test the hypothesis and inferential stat was tested by t-test. The results of the analysis are presented below:

Table 1: Social-demographic characteristics of respondents

Items	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	121	48.4
	Female	129	51.6
	Total	250	100
Age	Below 30years	77	30.8
	31-40years	95	38
	41-50years	65	26
	51years and above	13	5.2
	Total	250	100
Marrital Status	Married	168	67.2
	Single	79	31.6
	Others	3	1.2
	Total	250	100
Monthly income	Less than #100,000	155	62
	#100,000-#150,000	69	27.6
	#150,000-#200,000	21	8.4
	#200,000 and above	5	2
	Total	250	100
Religion	Islam	191	76.4
	Christianity	52	20.8
	Traditional	5	2
	Others	2	0.8
	Total	250	100

Table 1 shows descriptive analysis of respondents by demographic information. Out of 250 respondents sampled in the study area, 121 (48.4%) were male while 129 (61.6%) were female with majority of the respondents within the active population age bracket of 31 to 40 and 41 to 50. The income status of the respondents had majority earning less than #100,000 per month.

Table 2: To measure rural development

Variables	Yes		No		Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
	F	%	f	%			
Before the lockdown, is there electricity, water and good road in your town/ village?	55	96.5	195	3.5	2.33	0.71	Disagree
Is there electricity supply in your town?	30	73.3	220	26.7	2.08	0.76	Disagree
Is there enough schools to cater for at least basic education in your town/village?	100	84.2	150	15.8	2.91	0.68	Disagree
Is there increase in the rate of school enrollment in your town?	105	40.8	145	59.2	2.43	0.71	Disagree
Is there hope that with the effect of COVID-19 government would provide these facilities to your town after the lockdown?	50	41.7	200	58.3	1.7	0.95	Disagree
Grand Mean					2.2	0.76	Disagree

Source: Field Survey (2021)

Table 2 shows that the study area has a deterred development and there is no prospect for the provision of facilities that would facilitate it by government due to the COVID-19 effect.

Table 3: To Measure the relationship between rural development and poverty level

Variables	Yes		No		Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
	f	%	f	%			
Do you have a good waste drainage and toilet facility in your home before the lockdown	55	22.0	195	78.0	2.33	0.31	Disagree
The absent of drainage and toilet facility in your home is not connected to the level of your income	30	12.0	220	26.7	2.08	0.26	Disagree
Can you comfortably provide for your basic needs e.g food, cloth, shelter during and after the lockdown	100	40.0	150	60.0	2.5	0.18	Disagree
Government provision of facilities improved of poverty rate before the lockdown in your area	105	40.8	145	59.2	3.14	0.51	Disagree
Grand Mean					2.51	0.32	Disagree

Source: Field Survey (2021)

The response from the respondents gives a grand mean of 2.51 and 0.32 standard deviation, proving that rural development does not correspond with poverty level.

Table 4: To measure the relationship between rural development and unemployment level

Variables	Yes		No		Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
	F	%	f	%			
Is farming embraced by the people of your community during and after the lockdown	241	96	9	3.6	3.33	0.71	Agree
Is fishing, mining and other available jobs embraced by the people in your area during and after the lockdown	11	4.4	239	96	2.08	0.76	Disagree
Do entrepreneurs in your area have access to bank loan	7	2.8	243	97	2.19	0.68	Disagree
Grand Mean					2.53	0.72	Disagree

Source: Field Survey (2021)

Table 4 shows that farming was more embraced by the people during and after the lock down, indicating that the campaign for income diversification from oil sectors got a good response in the agricultural sector. Fishing, mining and other available jobs in the study area were not embraced by many during after the lock down while access to bank loan that could encourage involving in other productive activities is not available. is table has proven that the campaign for income diversification from oil sectors got a good response in the agricultural sector.

Hypothesis One

H₀₁: There is no significant influence of rural development on the poverty level of the respondents during and after lock down.

H₁₁: There is a significant influence of rural development on the poverty level of the respondents during and after lock down.

Table 5: Relationship between Rural Development and Poverty Level

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-cal	sig. (2-tailed)
RD	250	2.203	0.760	3.045	0.072
PL	250	2.510	0.320		

** Significant at p<0.05, (RD=Rural Development and PL = Poverty Level)

Source: Fieldwork (2020)

Table 5 reports the means, standard deviations, and t-statistics for the study variables. Results revealed that there is no relationship between rural development and poverty level. Null hypothesis was not rejected since the is p-value greater than 0.05(i.e sig. = 0.072) and conclude that there is no significant influence of rural development and poverty level of the respondents during and after lock down.

Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: There is no significant influence of rural development on the unemployment level of the respondents during and after lock down.

H₁₂: There is a significant influence of rural development on the unemployment level of the respondents during and after lock down.

Table 6: Relationship between rural development and unemployment level

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-cal	sig. (2-tailed)
RD	250	2.20	0.76	3.31	0.065
UL	250	2.53	0.72		

** Significant at $p < 0.05$, (RD=Rural Development and UL = Unemployment Level)

Source: Fieldwork (2020)

Table 6 reports the means, standard deviations, and t-statistics for the study variables. It revealed that there is no relationship between rural development and unemployment level. Hence, the null hypothesis was not rejected since the p-value greater than 0.05 (i.e sig. = 0.065) and it was conclude that there is no significant influence of rural development and unemployment level of the respondents during and after lock down.

Findings

It is obvious from the analysis above that the lockdown of activities due to the pandemic would have a serious effect on the Nigeria economy. This study reveals that before the lockdown, many Nigerians live below the world acceptable poverty line and this is as a result of the high level of unemployment in the country. The COVID-19 restrictive measures, severely affect activities that promote economic and social development and coexistence in the country which actually resulted in a drastic increase in unemployment level especially among the low class citizens (mostly residing in rural areas) in the country. The aftermath of the lockdown was felt in sectors like education, agriculture, oil, sport, tourism, commerce and industry and has also greatly affected the country's GDP causing a reduction in the government revenue due to lower demand for oil. This has actually contributed to an increase in unemployment and therefore increasing poverty rate in the country. It was also discovered that despite the campaign of income diversification over many decades, a larger percentage of government's revenue still comes from oil proceeds. Though, response from the study area proves that the campaign for income diversification from oil sectors got a good response in the agricultural sector, but this is not the only option available for diversification and that participation in other sectors must have being low due to lack of encouragement.

The reduction in the oil income has greatly affected government ability to fulfill her responsibilities such as development of rural areas. It was however revealed that both individual and government have now seen that campaigning for economic diversification is not sufficient for economic development but rather a prompt swing into action by all is needed to put in place factors that would help to achieve sustainable development of rural area so as to be able to curb the worrisome rate of poverty and unemployment in the country.

Conclusion

It was concluded that the dependent of the Nigeria economy on the oil sector have not helped to spring up development as expected to the rural areas and even to the country as a whole. This study also shows that the lockdown has opened the mind of individual, firms and government to various opportunities they could explore to generate more income. We could also infer from this study that Nigeria has a large rural sector that calls for modernization and that the economic diversification the country requires could be achieved through the development of rural areas. It is therefore important to put in place factor that would encourage participation in other sectors as this would aid the development of the rural areas in Nigeria. This would increase employment opportunities and when citizens are gainfully employed, it reduce the poverty rate experienced in an economy, as the pandemic has made a lot of citizen especially the low level workers to loss their job. This coupled with the devaluation of Nigeria currency has reduced the purchasing power of the citizen, making the low income earners to be at more disadvantage.

It is therefore concluded that the development of rural areas has resulted in reduction in unemployment, individuals would have access to reliable and secured income and as the income of individuals/citizens increases, (through citizens patronage) source of income to organizations and government would increase making each stakeholders have higher purchasing power to cater for their needs and meet up with tier responsibility which would in the long run translate to economic development.

Recommendation

In order to be able to strategies responses to tackle unemployment and poverty as an aftermath of this disease outbreak and translate such to economic development, an effort to reduce over dependence on oil income in Nigeria should be made. It is recommended that government at all level as well as individuals and stakeholders should put in place actions that would encourage rural development as a means to diversifying income of individual, firms and government. Policies that would guarantee job security, encourage rural development and ease participation of any citizens in all sectors of the economy should also be established as a means through which economic diversification could be attained. Also, strict and effective policies to tackle several factors (like mismanagement of the economy, frequent changes in economic and social policies due to frequent change in government) responsible for high rate of unemployment and poverty should be put in place.

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