

The Impact of Government Responses to COVID-19 on the Urban Poor in Lagos State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The world is in the grip of a global health crisis as the World Health Organisation has declared COVID-19 a global pandemic because of its rapid spread and high mortality rate. Africa has not been spared, with Lagos State, which is the hub of economic activities in Nigeria, having the highest confirmed cases in the country. Although measures have been introduced to combat the spread of COVID-19, the pandemic is likely to have significant and diverse impacts on the means of livelihood of the people, most notably, those in the informal sector. It is against this backdrop that this study adopted a qualitative research method to examine how government response to COVID-19 can impact the survival of the urban poor in Lagos State. Primary and secondary data were collected from articles, government publications, internet sources, and key informant interviews. Participants were selected through random sampling and data collected was analysed using content analysis. The study finds that imposed lockdown and other government interventions have negative impacts on poor urban communities, such as loss of livelihoods and successive hunger. The study concluded that the government's effort and policy response are not conducive for the survival of poor urban citizens. The research recommends prioritising the essential needs of the urban poor by recognising vulnerabilities and facilitating fair access to livelihoods and palliatives. Otherwise, the poor will continue to make the containment of the virus a difficult task.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, survival, policy responses, urban poor, livelihoods



Introduction

The new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) was first discovered in Wuhan in December 2019 and declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020; Riou & Althaus, 2020). According to the World Health Organisation, measures to curtail the spread of the virus are hinged on each country's ability to control and limit local transmission through the implementation of strict standards of control, prevention, and detection (WHO, 2020). Gilbert et al (2020) avers that a country's health capacity is the primary means of managing and controlling the virus. Their evaluation of the preparedness and vulnerability risk of African countries shows that Egypt, South Africa, Nigeria, and Algeria have the highest risk due to their heterogeneous nature. The fight against the virus requires the application of vast technical expertise and effective public health interventions. These are dependent on a country's infrastructures and resources. Nkengasong and Mankoula (2020) acknowledge the inadequate laboratory capacity, limited financial resources, insufficient public health human resources, and the overall weak healthcare systems in many African countries, which will make combating the virus a daunting task. In a similar vein, Iroulo and Boateng (2020) buttress the fact that many African countries are faced with a political, social, economic, and infrastructural challenge, which impedes the implementation of measures such as physical distancing, quarantining, and availability of intensive care that are needed to combat the pandemic. Recommendations such as washing hands with soap and water, self-isolation, and physical distancing require access to essential services such as water and basic sources of livelihoods (Wilkinson, 2020).

As the world awaits the discovery of a vaccine for the pandemic, countries are developing several policy responses to contain the virus. Some of the measures include border closures, total lockdowns, closing of markets and restraining of social or religious gathering. Nigeria imposed a four-week lockdown in Lagos State, the epicentre of the virus in the country. During the four weeks, people were required to stay indoors except those working in essential services such as medical personnel, security, among others. Businesses and worship centres were closed, transportation suspended, interstate movement prohibited, public gatherings suspended, and street hawking forbidden (Kalu, 2020). The city's informal businesses – hawking, the selling of food and drinks, especially on the roadside and street markets – which are a significant source of livelihood for the urban poor, were put on hold. This study investigates the impact of such government COVID-19 response and intervention to curtail the spread of the virus on the means of livelihood of the urban poor. Little is known about how urban poor are coping with the pandemic. What has been the impact of the lockdown on their means of earning a living? How has government measures to mitigate economic hardships benefitted the urban poor? The study answers these questions by exploring the policy responses of the Nigerian government to the pandemic and the effectiveness of these policies in curtailing the



spread of the virus. This study highlights the main concerns and challenges arising from government policies geared towards managing the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in poor urban settlements. This paper is divided into four sections: a review of relevant literature on the impacts of the pandemic, the measures and responses of African governments, the Nigerian government's responses and interventions to the pandemic, and the impact of government measures on the means of livelihood of the urban poor.

Social and Economic Impacts of Covid-19: A Review of Literature

Since reaching a global scale in February 2020, there have been several scholarly works assessing the impact of the pandemic on the social, political, and economic wellbeing of people. In his work on the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on China and Korea, Tandon (2020) notes that COVID-19 has increased human indisposition and mortality rate especially for the vulnerable, such as the elderly and people with underlying ailments. He recommends strengthened biomedical research, a developed health care delivery system, and improved communication and management mechanisms for agencies responsible for mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic (Tandon, 2020).

In their analysis on the effects of COVID-19 on the economic growth of Malaysia, Hasanat et al (2020) admitted that many lives have been lost as a result of the pandemic and e-commerce business has been greatly affected negatively. COVID-19, as a threat to humanity, is emphasised by Cluver et al (2020) who says that the economic impact of the pandemic is claimed to have intensified parental stress, violence, and abuse against children. These challenges are aggravated in low-income and large households and make children the most vulnerable (Cluver et al., 2020). Although social distancing has reduced economic activities in the United States of America, it has helped to curtail the spread of the virus, thereby saving people's lives (Thunstrom, Newbold, Finnoff, Ashworth, and Shogren, 2020). Conversely, Barua (2020) recommended that countries, especially China and Europe, should design policy measures to mitigate economic shocks as the economic impacts are expected to throw many countries into economic depression and recession. For example, the United States has suffered the biggest job losses in her history due to the pandemic, with over twenty million jobs losses in April 2020, reaching an unemployment rate of 14.7% compared to 4.4% in March 2020 (Walker, et al., 2020). Similarly, the European Central Bank's president warned that Europe is experiencing an unprecedented economic shock due to the impact of the pandemic (Khan, 2020). Due to the devastating effects of the pandemic on Europe and North America, there has been concerns about how African continent might cope with the pandemic.

Ataguba (2020) argues that the vulnerable and the poor will feel the most significant economic impact of the pandemic aside from its economies of nations. The impact of COVID-19 on the fragile education sector of the Nigerian state includes the disruption of



school learning for over 40 million students and lack of access to daily meals, especially for disadvantaged students who rely on the free meals provided at schools (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020). In northern Nigeria, many Almajiri's (children from impoverished homes typically sent to Islamic rather than formal schools) were exposed to the coronavirus because of their vulnerability (Writer, 2020).

Marshal, Nkwadochi and Emmanuel (2020) concurs that other adverse effects on households include overwhelming health care problems, loss of jobs, rationing of food, unpaid allowances, and disruption of education. Okediya (2020) argues that COVID-19 is having its toll on trade and commercial activities, thereby making it tough for businesses to operate as usual. Kayode, Embrandiri and Olateju (2020) asserts that before COVID-19, rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa were yet to enjoy improved health facilities and standards of living. Hence, essential means of livelihood such as food, water, and access to health would pose a significant challenge in a lockdown situation. Meanwhile, according to van Dorn, Cooney and Sabin (2020), not everyone is equally affected by Covid-19, but the urban poor, due to lack of access to basic amenities, are more vulnerable to contracting the virus. Corburn et al. (2020) recommends an equitable approach, which includes a participatory governance, government investment in the well-being and health of the urban poor and provision of financial relief, to avoid a jeopardy of government's cushioning measures against the coronavirus. It was observed that measures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic ought to recognise the vulnerabilities of the urban poor to evade threats to the survival of the overall masses.

Perspectives on how Africa has Managed the COVID-19 Pandemic

There are possibilities that the strategies deployed in advanced countries to contain the spread of COVID-19 may not be successful in low and middle-income countries especially in rural and poor urban settlements. This is because such settlements are characterised by limited infrastructures and are populated with citizens who depend on the informal economy for their livelihoods (Wilkinson, 2020). Hence, measures such as social distancing, regular washing of hands, and the use of hand sanitizers may be challenging to implement. More so, Africa is expected to be the worst hit due to its poverty, high rate of illiteracy, poor health infrastructures, and a high population of rural and urban poor. In early February 2020, when countries around the world began to record cases of COVID-19, WHO predicted that Africa might be the epicentre of the pandemic. However, with no record of a single case on the continent until February 20, 2020, in Egypt, the prediction failed. With 40% of the confirmed global cases found in Europe as of March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared Europe the epicentre of the pandemic (WHO, 2020). According to Steenhuisen and Nebhay (2020), Africa as a continent has responded to the present global pandemic by establishing the Africa Taskforce for Coronavirus Preparedness and Response (AFTCOR). This was a joint effort of the African Union Commission, African



Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), World Health Organisation (WHO), and African countries. Only two countries could boast of having a diagnostic capacity to test COVID-19 as of early February 2020. However, with the efforts of AFTCOR, more than forty countries have been capacitated to diagnose COVID-19 infection by the end of February 2020.

As of September 21, 2020, Nigeria had only conducted about 480,874 tests and recorded 57,437 cases, while South Africa had a record of 4,047,723 tests and 661,936 cases as of the same date (Africa CDC, 2020). Based on the slow testing capacity in African countries, the possibility of community transmission without discovery by the health authorities cannot be overlooked. For instance, before the establishment of the testing centre in Kano State, Nigeria, there were cases of mysterious deaths of one hundred people in three days, with the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 confirming that the deaths were COVID-19 related. Historically, Nigeria was successfully able to contain the deadly Ebola virus outbreak in 2014 due to its swiftness to act. It had a higher chance to withstand the onset of coronavirus with a joint effort of all citizens and uncompromising leaders. Effective leadership to attract the trust of the citizenry is vital. Still, the current handling of the coronavirus is worrisome; primarily due to the lukewarm attitude of the presidency on how best the country can curtail the virus. For instance, the Nigerian President delivered his first speech in response to the pandemic after a month of recording the first case in the country. The opposite holds in other African countries such as Ghana, South Africa and Madagascar where the presidents of these countries are at the fore of providing leadership for their population amidst the pandemic. Iroulo and Boateng (2020) affirmed that the rapidity of the spread of the virus was contained by countries that observed specific guiding principles of intensive hygienic routines, physical distancing, travel restrictions, and self-isolation. This particularly reduced the pressure on the health systems of these countries.

Iroulo and Boateng (2020) highlight the role of traditional rulers in handling the pandemic, especially in Africa. They suggest that the response to coronavirus should be localised in Africa. Their study acknowledge a good example in the ruler of the Asante Kingdom in Ghana who intensified the sensitisation of his community through his office. Similarly, the study of Kobia and Gitaka (2020) recognises the effort by Senegal's Pasteur Institute in collaboration with the UK to develop an affordable test kit for the virus. Hand sanitizers was massively made available in the market courtesy of some universities in Ghana and Liberia. On the African continent, enlightenment on the reality of the virus and campaigns for good hygiene and the need to maintain social distancing are fast spreading through social media. Government agencies and civil societies are also educating the masses on the need to stay safe by washing their hands with soap and running water, practising social distancing and self-isolating. However, some of these measures have severe impacts on the means of livelihood and survival of the urban poor. For instance, the majority of



Nigerians are in the informal sector of the economy, and the government does not have a comprehensive data of her citizens. Because of these factors, some of the measures to curtail the virus are difficult to implement (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Methodology

Study Area

Lagos state is one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa with a population of approximately fifteen million (Ayeni, 2017). Being the economic capital of Nigeria and the perceived opportunities in it make the rate of rural-urban migration into Lagos very high, hence, an increase in the number of the urban poor in the state. According to the Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (NBS), over 40% of the population live in coastal communities and over 60% work in the informal sector of the economy. The state has the highest number of coronavirus cases in Nigeria, and it is the first state on which the federal government of Nigeria imposed a total lockdown of fourteen days as a means of curbing the spread of the virus (Ezebuike, 2020).

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research method, which is more suitable to explore the understanding and meanings that research participants give to a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative method has the advantage of providing deeper insight into a phenomenon from small samples (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019). Key informant interviews were conducted, between April and May 2020, telephonically due to the need to comply with COVID-19 safety measures and regulations. The study utilised two sampling techniques, namely, purposive and random sampling. Four local governments, which include Ojo, Amuwo-Odofin, Ajeromi-Ifelodun, and Ifako-Ijaiye, were purposively selected for the study. The choice of these local governments was informed data from the Lagos State government, which shows that the constituencies of the four local governments have the highest number of urban poor (LSG, 2015) and recent studies show the poverty rate to be on the increase (Omoniyi, 2018; Adelowokan, Maku, Babasanya & Adesoye, 2019). The forty households were randomly selected, 10 from each of the sampled local governments. Most of the households in the sample consist of urban poor who earn daily wages as casual workers of factories, minibuses drivers, minibuses conductors, petty business people, and small shop owners. People in these categories constitute a demographic group that is vulnerable to economic shocks and would need major support to ride the loss of means of survival and livelihoods. The collected data was analysed using content analysis.

Findings and Discussion



This section begins with the presentation of the sociodemographic characteristics of the study's participants represented in the Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Socio-demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Sex Distribution		
Female	22	55
Male	18	45
Total	40	
Age Distribution		
18-35Years	07	17.5
35-55Years	28	70
56Years and Above	05	12.5
Total	40	100.0
Marital Status		
Single	08	20
Married	26	65
Widow	06	15
Total	40	100.0
Educational Background		
Elementary	28	70
SSCE	06	15
National Diploma	6	15
Total	40	100.0
Employed before COVID-19		
Yes	36	90
No	4	10
Total	40	100.0
Nature of Employment		
Civil Servants	2	5
Traders (small business owners, street vendors, retail shop owners)	4	10
Bus drivers and taxi drivers	11	27.5
Casual Workers (conductors and wage labourers in construction jobs)	23	57.5
Total	40	100.0

Source: Authors (2020)

The gender distribution indicated more female participants with 55% to 45% of males respectively. 17.5% of the participants are between the ages of 18-35 years, 70% which constitute the majority are between the ages of 36-55 years and 12.5% are 56 years and above. The data indicated that majority have dependants and more responsibilities as 20% are single, 15% are widow and 65% are married. The majority of the participants



constituting 70% have only primary school certificates, 15% have senior secondary school certificate and national diploma respectively. On the nature of the employment, 5% of the participants are civil servants, 10% are traders, 27.5% are minibus drivers and 57.5% are casual workers. This shows a high number of casual workers among the participants. The majority of the participants are traders, bus drivers and casual workers. The participants offered their views on the impact of government's responses to COVID-19 from different perspectives based on personal experiences. Data retrieved unpacks diverse effects such as, impact on job security, food security, upsurge prices of food and commodities and social welfare inadequacies.

Impacts of Government Responses to COVID-19 on Urban Poor

As revealed in the demographic characteristics of the participants, the majority are in the informal sector of the economy and the imposition of lockdown, restriction on movements and border closure has several impacts on their livelihoods, some of these are presented below.

- *Loss of jobs and livelihood*

The data shows massive shock on the earnings and livelihoods of the urban poor. Due to the lockdown, a majority of the people constituting 90% of those that participated in the interview were unable to go to work, thereby losing their daily earnings. At the same time, those who are in the formal sector as casual workers got only half of their salaries from their employers. Another 60% said that they had been relieved of their jobs at the beginning of the lockdown. The majority of the respondents that have not been working since the beginning of the lockdown include bus drivers, taxi drivers, conductors, retail shop owners, small business owners, street vendors, and wage labourers in construction jobs. A participant interviewed from Amuwo-Odofin local government identified himself as a casual worker and noted:

The bakery where I am managing is locked. We have been asked to go home to obey the Lagos state government. I want to work so that I can get money to eat but no customers, no sales and no salary.

Those who were employed before the lockdown said that they did not receive full salaries while casual factory workers were laid off immediately the lockdown commenced. However, those in the category of daily wages will resume their everyday hustling after the ease of the lockdown, albeit there was a temporary decline in their income which has grave consequences on their survival. Some of the casual workers that were relieved of their jobs also considered it a temporary layoff, while others considered it a permanent retrenchment. Those that think the lockdown is a temporary one believe that they will return to their work after the lockdown given that their work is a casual one and factories upon resumption will still need them. Those in the other category believed that they may

not be recalled due to the revenue loss by their companies as a result of the lockdown. At this point, it is difficult to conclude that the job loss is permanent or temporary. It depends on the companies. Post-COVID, casual workers will still be needed. Still, those in other categories may not depend on the policy such companies decide to adopt for recovery.

- *Increase in prices of food and impacts on business ventures*

Another stringent measure introduced by the government during the lockdown was the closure of most informal markets in the state as a way of ensuring social distancing and curtailing community transmission of the virus. A businesswoman from Ajeromi-Ifelodun local government observed:

COVID-19 has affected my business greatly. No patronage. Venues have been closed until further notice. People usually will come out but they are now observing social distancing. People are in survival mood. I am looking at other ways to make money and offer services to my customers.

On the other hand, supermarkets selling foodstuffs are allowed to open, given that they can provide some safety measures that the informal market cannot ensure. However, according to the findings, the prices of goods have skyrocketed by 20% to 30%, and it becomes difficult for the urban poor to afford food and services. While rich people can buy as many foodstuffs as possible, the reverse is the case for people living in the slums whose sources of livelihood have been put on hold by the virus. Hence, they do not have sufficient money to buy foodstuffs and this has resulted in hunger. For example, one of the participants from Ojo local government said:

I am a bus driver; since the suspension of transportation by the government, I cannot work. I have five children and a wife to feed. We are suffering; we hardly have two meals per day since the beginning of the lockdown.

The situation is not peculiar to this man. The same could be said of the majority of the urban poor in the state whose sources of income have been put on hold due to the lockdown.

- *High rate of hunger*

The loss of earnings has affected the finances of many to buy foodstuffs and other essential commodities. Informal markets offer more than just food for the community, they also provide support for in times of need, such as credit purchasing of food items, which would be paid for on a later date. Such credit purchases cannot be made in supermarkets, which further worsens the situation of the urban poor. More so, most urban poor do not believe



that supermarkets are meant for them. They believe that a supermarket is a place meant for rich people to spend their money. Thus, with the supermarket as the only option for foodstuffs and the hike in food prices, the hunger situation worsens. The foodstuffs sold in the supermarket are not affordable to the urban poor and they are not accessible because most of them are far from the places they live. Another respondent from Ifako-Ijaiye local government confessed:

I am not afraid of coronavirus; what I am afraid of is the hunger virus. I am hungry. Hunger kills faster than 'coro'. Government said that we should not go out, but they did not provide food for us.

Several commentators and analysts have argued that the poorest group in the society will be the worst hit by the measures imposed by the government to curtail the spread of the virus. Most poor urbanites who rely on daily wages for survival have lost those wages due to the total lockdown, so they rely mostly on charity and government support for survival.

- *Social welfare and citizens' trust*

Although the government rolled out palliative measures for the poorest of the poor in Nigerians, there are some unanswered questions such as, how did a country without adequate data on its citizens determine the poorest of the poor? What were the parameters used? The palliative could be an avenue to deceive the masses and engage in corruption. The palliative items shared by the federal government include food items, groceries, and financial assistance. We asked our respondents if they received any form of food support from the federal government or the Lagos State government. The majority of them said that they received such support, but they were inadequate. For instance, the financial cost of the total support was less than 20 US Dollars, which is not enough to feed a household for three days. On the other hand, some of the participants alleged that the palliatives were given to the current administration's party members, that those who did not belong to the party did not receive any form of support from the government. A respondent from Ojo highlighted:

I did not get anything, no food, no nothing. My friend that got told me it is too small. I am told to wait but I do not trust that I will get. I can only pray God have mercy on me now.

The effort to manage the pandemic is not inclusive. With imminent protests from the masses, especially the poor, and the need to revive the economy, the government eased the lockdown on May 4, 2020 with no answers to the following questions: how can the urban poor using mass transit busses observe social distancing? How can people without decent accommodation and living conditions wash their hands regularly? Who will provide



the water? Regardless of the lockdown relaxation, the number of positive COVID-19 cases has continued on an upsurge. The urban poor, who can only eat after going out, are at a greater risk of being infected. How will they cope with the virus? If they are infected, how will they be treated? The growing cases of the pandemic in the city are disturbing and underline the need for the government to be more proactive, save lives, and address the humanitarian crisis posed by COVID-19. The long-term impacts of their survival and coping strategies must lead towards more protection for the urban poor so that they do not get infected. In April, the DG of WHO, Tedros A. G., stated:

In countries with huge populations, the stay-at-home orders and other lockdown measures utilised in some high-income countries may not be practical. Many refugees, migrants and poor people are already living in overcrowded conditions with limited resources and minimal access to health care. How will they survive a lockdown when they depend on daily labour to eat? (WHO, 2020).

As argued by Abdalla and Galea (2020), over half of urban residents in Africa live in informal settlements; therefore, curfews and lockdowns will be difficult to enforce, and they may lead to loss of livelihoods for the urban poor. While governments have a plan to feed the poor, the lack of technical know-how such as a database for the poor in a country like Nigeria makes feeding the poor a daunting task. More so, social distancing for those living in urban slums is unrealistic. Olapegba et al. (2020) further reveals that containment measures introduced by the Nigerian government had significant impacts on the daily lives of the citizens and have resulted in severe economic cost and social disruption. While some of the resultant effects are unavoidable, the provision of social safety nets, access to food stamps, and unemployment benefits could go a long way in easing the livelihood stresses experienced by the citizens. The containment strategies of issuing advice to the people without any meaningful provision of palliatives have resulted in criticism of the government.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Regardless of the government's effort to reduce the spread of COVID-19, findings from the study revealed that the measures are not sufficient and inclusive, especially considering the dynamics of its citizens. The urban poor are not only confronted with the long-lasting impact of the COVID-19 but have to grapple with the government's responses to curtail the pandemic. The substantial effect of lockdown has compounded the poverty status of many. The government's aggressiveness and coordination to curtail the spread of the virus are not harmonised with an inclusive essential support for the urban poor. More attention should be given to the welfare of the urban poor who have been marginalised with respect to the government responses to COVID-19. This is possible with greater political will and commitment to protect and support all citizens.



The political polarisation that could form a barrier against a coordinated action of government and citizens should be controlled. Any effort to entertain political polarisation can undermine the effort of the government. Meanwhile, the government should endear the citizens to them by being transparent and accountable in key areas that include but are not limited to funds for palliative care, and honest and updated information about the pandemic condition of the country. An important lesson is that response must be swift and uniform while learning from precedents and implementing immediate coping strategies. Besides, government must plan and perform a credible census that has been due since 2016. This exercise is anticipated to provide a comprehensive demographic information to conduct an effective development planning.

The inadequate intervention from the government indicates the need to revive infrastructure in local communities. Working through community leaders to reach the urban poor is essential for a local development model in response to the crisis. This would facilitate effective coordination of government and ease accessibility of aids to the most vulnerable among the rural and urban poor. Government's responses should also include the participation of multiple actors such as local governments, State governments, Foundations and Non- Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The rural economy should be diversified by building sources of people's livelihoods and saving the lives of the citizens. More so, the availability of and accessibility to basic amenities will secure the hygiene of the populace and reduce the strain on the government in case of uncertainties like the global pandemic. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is not only to be confronted, government also needs to be receptive to lessons learned from it.

These recommendations are anticipated to help avoid an uncontrollable situation in the country. A country like Britain, for instance, surpassed Italy with the second highest number of coronavirus deaths as countries ease lockdown. The easing of lockdown does not signify the end of the pandemic but an effort to sustain the economy. Therefore, all efforts must be directed towards ensuring the survival of citizens' lives, particularly the urban poor, who, in the process of saving the economy, must also be saved. Resources expended could spread beyond the instant cushioning of citizens during the lockdown to building resilient and sustainable urban livelihoods.

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