

Government Responses During and Post *Covid-19*: Implications for Good Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

Government responses to the needs of its citizens is core in good governance and therefore, it is pertinent to access the state of governance in Nigeria during and after the COVID-19 pandemic using lockdown, social distancing and palliatives policies in the evaluation during this period. The study examined government responses during COVID-19 pandemic and the implications for good governance in Nigeria. The study adopted documentary method for review of relevant literatures on conceptual discourse. The study adopted structural-functional theory to explain the phenomenon of the study. The study identified lack of commitment or political will on the part of leaders, poor funding of healthcare facilities and low wages of health workers; corruption in the public sector and amongst political office holders as set-backs to good governance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study recommended provision and accessibility of food assistance to the poor and vulnerable in an event of lockdown due to a pandemic, government needs to ensure members of the public comply with the social distancing policy due to the persistence of the COVID-19; government should also ensure that what is due of the people is given to them to avoid social upheavals.

Keywords: *Government Responses, COVID-19, Good Governance, lockdown, Social Distancing, Palliatives*

Introduction

In Nigeria, governance seems to be an unaccomplished quest with recurrent arguments on responsive governance. Governance entails government ability to respond to the socio-economic needs of its citizens without being persuaded. A responsive government is pivotal for good governance and vis-versa. Government policies and programmes are indispensable to government responses in relation to the socio-economic lives of citizens. Globally, democracy is believed to be the most acceptable form of government due to its ability to entrench good governance with people's oriented policies and programmes. Nigeria is in its twentieth year of democracy and as such, there should be drastic changes in social, economic, political and cultural disposition of its citizens.

According to Ake (2001), democratic good governance in the long run "will insist on the democratization of economic opportunities, the social betterment of the masses and a strong social welfare system". This assertion implies that a sustained democratic process guarantees good governance. Government responses to social problems and its sustainability are determinants of good governance in any society. Though democracy in Nigeria is nascent, it should not limit good governance in infrastructural development, quality healthcare, power, poverty alleviation, security, education, information and communication technology, housing and others. In the light of the foregoing, government responses during and post *COVID-19* pandemic is imperative for good governance in Nigeria.

Conceptual Discourse

Government can be described as a system or group of people governing an organized entity, generally a state or nation. It is the responsibility of the government to formulate policies and

take decisions that will promote the livelihood of the people. It is therefore necessary for the government at all levels to be people oriented and responsive to prevailing social maladies. Responses can be described as a reaction towards a phenomenon or object. It is government actions or inactions towards an existing social problem. These actions are expressed in forms of policies and programmes and their implementation. Unavoidably, every social problem requires government responses for such problem to be properly addressed whether it is caused by nature or human agent.

COVID-19 or Coronavirus disease 19 is a highly transmittable and pathogenic viral infection caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) that emerged in Wuhan, China (Shereen et al, 2020). The spread of this novel virus across the world posed a global social problem with rapid infection and increase in the number of deaths on daily basis. Government responses globally and Nigeria not exempted became paramount for the pandemic to be effectively and efficiently curbed.

Government Responses to *COVID-19* Pandemic in Nigeria

On January 23, 2020, the World Health Organization's International Health Regulations (IHR) Emergency Committee advised all nations globally to be prepared to deal with transmission of the new corona virus in their countries (World Health Organization, WHO, 2020). The preparation specified active surveillance, early detection, isolation and case management, contact tracing and prevention of onward spread of 2019 –nCov infection.

In Nigeria, the first case of Covid -19 infection was identified on February 27, 2020. According to Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) by June 13, the country had tested only 92, 924 people of which 15,682 had contracted the *COVID-19* virus. Two states and the FCT had the highest number of cases at the early stage, they were Lagos (7,035 cases, 82 deaths); Kano (1,091 cases, 50 deaths) and FCT (1, 212 cases, 26 deaths). The rapid spread of this virus resulted in the Federal and States Government commencing action on possible preventive measures to curb the spread of the virus. For the purpose of this paper, government responses during and post *COVID-19* pandemic, will be assessed using the following variables; lockdown, social distancing and palliatives.

Lockdown

The government implemented the lockdown policy and stay-at-home order as a response to the curbing of the spread of the *COVID-19* pandemic. This resulted in the closure of schools, religious centres, social gathering, malls and markets. The Federal government imposed a two weeks lockdown in Lagos, Ogun State and Abuja (FCT) between March 30 and April 14. This order was further extended for another two weeks to April 28, 2020. This action culminated into states governors imposing lockdown and curfew in respective states on several occasions. The Federal Government further constituted a Presidential Task Force (PTF) on *COVID-19* pandemic to keep the public informed with daily developments on the pandemic (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, NCDC, 2020).

On April 27, 2020, the President Muhammad Buhari announced a gradual opening of the lockdown in Lagos, Ogun and FCT effective from May 4, 2020. State governments also engaged in gradual opening of the lockdown across the country.

Social Distancing

Social distancing policy became necessary to further stem the tide of the *COVID-19* pandemic. Government and healthcare professionals advised citizens to keep social distancing as a means of curtailing the spread of the virus due to the resumption of normal activities both in public and private sectors (Centre for Policy Impact and Global Health, 2020). There was limitation in the number of people per social gathering, hugging and handshakes were prohibited. These became a new normal way of life in our society during the pandemic, financial institutions had to regulate the number of customers that access their facilities at a given time, thereby causing a delay in

transactions undertaken per a day. The social distancing was accompanied by compulsory use of face mask and regular hand washing and use of sanitizers.

Palliatives

The palliative policy was introduced by government to cushion the negative effect of the *COVID-19* pandemic on the poor and vulnerable in the society. These palliatives were food items and conditional cash transfer for the poor families in the informal sector that their means of livelihood has been affected negatively by the *COVID-19* pandemic through lockdown and restricted movement. In April 1, 2020, the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs Disaster Management and Social Development announced that it will provide food rations and conditional cash transfer to households that depended on daily wage and are registered on the National Social Register (NSR) (Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, FMHADMSD, 2020).

Challenges to Government Responses during *COVID-19* Pandemic

Political Will

It is imperative that leaders develop and imbibe strong political will in order to deliver on the goals of governance. No nation makes progress with leaders who lack the political will for policy making, implementation and decision taking in relation to the welfare of the citizens. Nigeria's preparation for the pandemic was not timely, as relevant institutional structures were activated later than they were supposed to which would have curtailed the negative impact of the *COVID-19* pandemic on socio-economic lives of the people and number of deaths recorded. According to (Post et al, 2010), Political will is when a set of decision makers with a common understanding of a particular problem on the formal agenda is committed to supporting a commonly perceived potentially effective policy solution.

Poor Funding

Funding is a vital part of policy and programme implementation. In Nigeria, poor funding has become a recurrent decimal in the public space on government projects and programmes. Critical public sectors like health, agriculture, education, power, housing, environment and security deserve adequate funding to address the needs of the people in these areas and guarantee sustainable development. Developed countries are committed to proper funding of their public sector to enhance effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery. For instance, the health care facilities across the country are poorly funded and as such the healthcare professionals are unable to render quality healthcare services to the people. The wages of health workers is extremely poor compared to their counterparts in other countries. These factors contributed to the inability of them to successfully control the spread of the government to successfully control the spread of the *COVID-19* pandemic on time.

Corruption

Corruption is a bane to development in any society. The public sector in Nigeria is not free from this monster. According to Tolu and Ogunro (2012), corruption occurs with impunity due it its perception of being a society-induced activity that now enjoys popular support. The present administration made the fight against corruption one of its key agenda on assumption of office in 2015. Six years after, there has not been any significant change in the narrative. The recent events in the country during the #ENDSARS protest that led to the discovery of the *COVID-19* palliatives meant for distribution to the people but were rather hoarded in warehouses in different states across the country is an indication that corruption has eaten deep into the fabrics of our society even at government level. This act resulted to social upheavals and wanton destruction of public and private properties, a sign of the people losing confidence in their leaders.

Prospects for Good Governance

Nigeria is in its twentieth year of democratization and the sustainability of this process is an indicator that with the right leadership in every successive administration, the country will consolidate on the gains of democracy. The growth and development of any nation depends to a large extent on continuity. There is need for a synergy between past and present administration on existing policies and programmes that are people oriented. Programmes like National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) established under the administration of the former President Olusegun Obasanjo was an initiative for the alleviation of poverty in the country by increasing power needs in the country for the private sectors to engage in higher productivity of goods and services. The introduction of the Youth Enterprise with innovation in Nigeria (YOUWIN) was an initiative of former President Goodluck Jonathan driven towards youth empowerment to help alleviate poverty in Nigerian homes. The programme was for enterprising youths to access funds to start up their own businesses.

Presently, the President Buhari administration introduced the N-Power programme for Nigerian graduates who after completion of their National Youth Service Corps are yet to be engaged in either the public or private sector to earn income for livelihood; Trader Moni for the poor women who engage in trading to support their businesses, thereby being able to provide food for their families.

The aforementioned policies and programmes at various degrees require sustainability which can only be achieved through continuity in policies and programmes. The recent events in the country through the #ENDSARS protest has awakened the consciousness of Nigerians, especially the youths to the need for respect to the rule of law, rights of citizens, accountability and transparency in governance which are indicators of good governance. The current trend of social consciousness and the need for equality and justice, youth inclusiveness, gender equality and inclusiveness, accountability and transparency in governance are indices of good governance prospects in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Structural-functional theory

This theory posits that the society is a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals in that society. The theory was postulated by Herbert Spencer, an English Philosopher and Biologist (1820-1903). The central premise of this theory is that for any society to maintain stability and achieve sustainable development, the institutions of government must have a synergy existing between them so as to deliver on the goals of good governance which are the desire of the citizens. The *COVID-19* pandemic cost the government at Federal and State levels to put machineries in motion of relevant structures of government to curtail the pandemic in Nigeria. The need to protect the lives of citizens during the *COVID-19* pandemic led to the implementation of lockdown, social distancing and palliatives policies in the country.

Conclusion

Government is a continuum; however the essence of government is not devoid of its capability to response to the needs of the people on time and without persuasion. A responsive government is a people oriented government. The infrastructural deficits and inadequacies exposed in our governance is as a result of lack of commitment on the part of leaders to do the right thing at any given time. poor funding of the public sector in relation to projects and programmes of government that are people oriented, neglect of healthcare facilities and non-improvement in the wages of health workers by government are indicators of inadequacies in government especially during the *COVID-19* pandemic. Corruption needs to be drastically reduced, if not completely eradicated from our society, specifically, the public sector. Political office holders must be aware that they are in that position to serve the people not themselves and their families.

Recommendations

1. It is imperative for the government to make adequate preparations to provide food assistance to the poor and vulnerable in our society in an event of lockdown due to a pandemic. The food should not be given to a privileged few but every deserving citizen.
2. The government needs to do more to ensure compliance by members of the public on social distancing or physical distancing policy. The law enforcement officials need to ensure full compliance to the *COVID-19* regulation as the pandemic is still in existence.
3. The government should always ensure that what belongs to the people is given to them without undue protocols and delay. The *COVID-19* palliatives meant to provide succour to citizens were hoarded in different warehouses across the country which defeats accountability and transparency that are key determinants of good governance.

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