

Covid-19 Public Programmes and Implementation Challenges: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

The study examined public programmes and their impacts on Nigerians as measures to cushion the effect of COVID-19. Documentary records were used for conceptual discourse and review. The theoretical framework of this paper anchored on system theory by David Easton which argues for public policies emanating from demands by masses on government and all segments functioning well for the good of the whole. It was concluded that corruption has caused the essence of the Nigerian Youth Investment Fund (NYIF), Special Public Work and other stimulus measures by federal government to be defeated. Recommendations were for government to make financial sacrifice in registering and obtaining BVN, TIN and CAC for small business owners. Also, that the process of Special Public Work should be reshaped to imbibe transparency, noting that those found wanting in food diversion should be penalized to forestall future occurrence.

Keywords: Government, Public Policies, Public Programmes, COVID-19, Nigerian Youth Investment Fund (NYIF), Special Public Work (SPW) programme and Welfare Stimulus Programmes

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Introduction

The primary function of government at all levels is security of lives and properties within its domain. This is because there is a social contract between government and the governed (citizens) precipitated by the fact that resources meant for all are controlled by the elected or the selected few on behalf of others. It entails therefore that; the official who are often regarded as governments are only representing other citizens in the managing of the national resources, and the resources must be channelled for the benefit of all the citizens equitably and fairly (Dryzek, 2002). Whatever form of government in practice, the welfare of the citizens as well as the security of lives and properties is fundamental. It behoves on those in authority to ensure that the yearnings and aspirations of the public are met through prompt responses. In the Marxist theoretical scheme, structures such as “those of the political system and the state, thus exist to carry out necessary functions which can be for the good of the whole society” (Anderson, 2011).

Consequently, government is saddled with the responsibility of ensuring that the plights of the general populace are addressed promptly and adequately when the need arises. It is worthy of note, that the government response to social issues often comes in the form of public policies which are directed at addressing a matter of public concern. A problem becomes a matter of public concern only when a large number of people in the society are affected and demanding urgent attention (Anderson, 1996). This points to the fact that not every problem is attended to by government, but the ones that affects a large number of people and is verified to be worthy of government’s attention. Notably, government’s attention to a societal problem is often through policies, structured in programmes and projects for execution to cushion the effects of such a problem on the citizens or targeted group (Pearson, 1995).

Therefore, it is germane for the government of all nations to swing into action through various policies to cushion the effects of world pandemic known as the corona virus or *COVID-19* pandemic.

COVID-19 outbreak was first discovered in China and penetrated into other nations and regions of the world on different dates, but was declared as public emergency of international concern on January 30th, 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO). However, Nigeria received the flash of this pandemic on the 27th of February 2020. It was in 2017 revealed that Nigeria scored poorly in terms of the capacity to prevent, detect and respond to International Health Regulations (World Health organization-WHO Reports, 2017). This report projected that Nigeria was 2.6 percent across 13 detect indicators, 1.9 percent across 15 JEE prevention indicators and 1.5 percent across 20 indicators in response. This was confirmed with the wide spread of *COVID-19* in the country since 27th of February, 2020 when the first case of infected person was recorded. Many people have died, some still in isolation centres while some are still quarantined as suspected persons till date (Punch, 2020).

To cushion the negative impact of the *COVID-19* on citizens, Nigerian government has taken numerous health, social, and economic measures through policies and programmes as obtained in other countries of the world.

Conceptual Issues

Government

Government refers to a system whereby a segment of people are saddled with the responsibility of enacting and enforcing laws in the society (Wikipedia, 2020). The legitimacy of making and enforcing laws is the exclusive right of a chosen group of person so as to ensure social control. It entails an institutional framework for enacting laws, setting of policies and piloting affairs in a political unit, region or community.

The structural behavior of government is directed at delivering crucial services of public demand and not profit driven as private entities. Government also defines a mechanism for determining and executing organizational policies. Simply put, it means from the foregoing, that government is the managing of the general resources by a given group for the benefit of all. It is termed “good governance” when it manages resources in a way and manner that satisfaction is ascertained by majority of the masses and how their social problems are attended promptly to.

Public policy

Public policy is a purposive course of action followed by an actor or group of actors in determining a matter of public concern (Anderson, 1996). Every policy of government is known by its exceptional attributes of action-oriented and purposefulness. A policy of government is seen as action-oriented because the actions of formulating and enforcing the policy is carried out by those in government. It is purposeful because every government policy is directed towards achieving something (Agbor & Celestine, 2015).

It means therefore that a policy is a response to a given social outcry that must be outstanding and calling for government urgent attention. Every policy is authoritative, which defines its legality so as not to be taken for granted. “Public policies are not made in situational vacuum, but are formulated within powerful sets of factual and normative constraints”. Government must understand that there are so many social forces competing in the society and as such must device proactive means of addressing all pressures. Policies are always structured down to programmes for execution and implementation. Actors of public policy include the executive, judiciary, legislature, technocrats and interest groups.

Public programmes

Public programmes are derivatives of National Development Plans (NDP) and are multi-sectorial; each is a collection of specific often related projects within the sector. Programmes are

like projects but are not confined to a specific geographical location (Onah, 2012). Programmes of the public are therefore, connected to developmental efforts of government in improving the standard of living of the targeted group in the society. It is a kind of response to the plight of the masses at a given point in time through a well-defined plan of activities. Actions of government through several measures to mitigate social tensions in the society are public programmes.

Programmes of government or public programmes are guided by a cycle, which defines activities from its conception to the end. This include identification, preparation, appraisal, implementation and evaluation (Onah, 2012). The most crucial stage of all is implementation stage where actions of government are converted into concrete reality. It is at the stage of implementation that determines the success or failure of a given public programme. Many programmes in Nigeria fail because of poor implementation precipitated by corruption and ethnicity etc.

Coronavirus

COVID-19 is said to be from the family of Ribonucleic (RNA) viruses. The name “Corona virus” came from the fact that its particle exhibits a characteristic of ‘Corona’ (roun) of spike protein around its lipids environment. (See http://www.oje.int/scientificexpertise/specific_information_and_recommendations/questions-and-answers-on-2019_novel-corona_virus. Akani & Gabriel (2020). Sources have pointed scientifically that the virus commonly exists in both human and animals. It is known to be highly contagious and can be transmitted between animals and humans. This pandemic is said to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as acute respiratory syndrome. It is referred to as pandemic by World Health Organization (WHO) because of its capacity to spread widely and prevalent nature across the world.

In December 2019, there was reports of human cases of pneumonia of unknown source exiting in Wuham city, Hubai province in China. The causative agent of this deathly respiratory disease of highly contagious nature was identified by Chinese Authority to be “Corona virus” (Source as found above). It is recorded that over 8,306,956 (eight million, three hundred and sixty thousand, nine hundred and fifty-six) cases of this virus are confirmed world over, with Nigeria having 17, 526. Many have died out of the figure presented above, some have recovered and many are still undergoing treatments. The transmission is still ongoing and no cure has been scientifically discovered and proven, making the recovery from it miraculous.

Public Programmes as Measures to Cushion *COVID-19* Pandemic in Nigeria

The following are some of the programmes introduced by the government of Federal republic of Nigeria as measures to cushion the negative effects of *COVID-19* on Nigerians:

Nigerian Youth Investment Fund (NYIF)

Nigerian Youth Investment Fund (NYIF) is a laudable initiative of the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sport Development, funded by the Central Bank of Nigeria. It is geared towards creating enabling environment for the youths to bring to brave their potentials that have been hidden due to lack of funds to build businesses. Nigerian youths are by this programme granted access to finance propelled towards increasing employment rate in the country. The capacity of the programme to expand job opportunities is assured by the fact that, businesses established by youths with potentials through this strategy will be able to engage other youths who may not be opportune to benefit directly from the programme. The engaged ones will also acquire business knowledge that can help them establish their own businesses in the long-run (Sahara Reporters, 2020). The total amount approved for this programme is Seventy-Five Billion Naira (75,000,000,000.00) by the Federal Executive Council on the 22nd of July, 2020. The programme is established for the period of 2020 – 2023 dedicated to investing in the innovative ideas, skills and talents of Nigerian youth, and to institutionally provide youths with a special window for

accessing much needed funds, business management skills and other needed inputs critical for sustainable enterprise development (<https://www.google.com/amp/s/w¹>).

Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development is the entity saddled with the responsibility of budgetary provisions and funds mobilization for effective implementation of this policy. NIRSAL Microfinance Bank (NMFB) is the financial institution for the scheme. Eligibility is for youths within the age bracket of 18 – 35 years with business or enterprises operating in Nigeria. The youth to benefit must be free of any convicted crime in the last 10 years and must possess the indigene certificate and have a valid Bank Verification Number (BVN). Also, youths to benefit from the scheme must have Tax Identification Number (TIN) and a registered certificate from Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) for a business.

However, applicants of the scheme must undergo a compulsory entrepreneurship training arranged by the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development. The training programme focuses on technology, agriculture, green economy, manufacturing, tourism, construction, supply chains, healthcare, creative sector, trading and others as may be reviewed from time to time by CBN).

Special Public Work (FGN SPW) Programme

This programme is another strategy adopted by the Federal Government of Nigeria to cushion the impact of *COVID-19* pandemic on citizens, particularly the youths. This programme is directed at engaging Seven Hundred and Seventy-Four Thousand (774,000) youths in menial jobs for three months across the 774 Local Government Areas of the Nation. This programme was originally designed to kick-off 1st of October, 2020 – December, 2020. New directives were given by the President Muhammadu Buhari that the 1,000 persons to be engaged in each of the 774 Local Government Areas in the country should commence 1st November, 2020 and not October as captured before, because the scheme was designed for dry season. Verification of those to be engaged as shortlisted earlier is carried out by designated banks seamlessly across the 774 Local Government Areas in the country (Vanguard, 2020).

This task is handled by special Public Works Department which is one of the four (4) core units of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE). It seeks to identify and exploit employment opportunities that abound in the public work domain by organizing the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled persons that are unemployed to carryout utility, environmental, infrastructural development and sanitation works.

Employment opportunities are achievable through proper assigning of graduates from the programme to available employers of labour. After graduation, self-employment may be secured by those who are serious minded and are ready to work for themselves other than working for people or organizations. Special Public Work Programme is designed to cover areas such as: Graduate Attachment Programme (GAP), Graduate Coding Scheme (GCS), Graduate Special Training Programme (GSTP), Environmental Beautification Training Scheme (EBTS), Solar Energy Training Scheme (SETS), Community Development Scheme (CDS) and Labour-Based Technology Training Scheme (LBTS).

Welfare Stimulus Programmes

The Central Bank of Nigeria has embarked on several strategies to reduce the magnitude of hardship caused by *COVID-19* on Nigerian citizens. Such of such measures are credit offers to poor families, MSME, cash transfer programme and food assistance.

The Credit Offer

The credit offer covers the initiative of Central Bank of Nigeria to make available Three Million Naira (N3m) for poor families that were affected by *COVID-19*. The beneficiaries are guided to be conscious that collateral and interest is needed for the facility to be obtained. The interest rate of this facility is low and those without collateral can use their community leaders as guarantors. The facility has a long moratorium/payment period.

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME)

The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) as a survival fund programme is created with the fundamental aim of supporting and protecting businesses from vulnerabilities occasioned by coronavirus pandemic. It promotes payroll support, digital registration, onboarding and monitoring of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises for the Federal Government Survival Fund Programme. The programme functions in the area of payroll support, guaranteed offtake and MSME grant. It is designed to also enable inventory management of the Guaranteed Offtake Scheme.

Cash Transfer

Cash transfer was announced on April 1st, 2020 by Federal Government as means of getting to the vulnerable households who are registered in the National Social Register (NSR). Twenty Thousand Naira (N20,000) is to be paid to those who are duly registered and captured in NSR which currently has only 2.6 million households covering 11 million people. The register is to be reviewed to accommodate 3.6 million households during the *COVID-19*.

Food Assistance

Consequent upon the lockdown in some states and later in all the parts of the country, hardship and hunger was increased. To check this menace, Federal Government promised to distribute food items to vulnerable households facing hunger as a result of *COVID-19*. The food items were to go around the states and regions of the country. This was precipitated by a call and willingness expressed by various organizations and individuals to help the poor people during *COVID-19*. Coalition Against *COVID-19* (*CACOVID-19*) realized over 72 Million Naira as goodwill donations from private individuals and organizations to help poor Nigerians. The distribution of food items was inadequate and questionable resulting in wanton vandalization of public and private properties when youths discovered that some food items were hoarded by government officials.

Challenges of Policy Implementation in Nigeria

It has been asserted that there is a widening gap in the public policy implementation in Nigeria. The lapses in the implementation process is prevalent in Nigeria and other third world countries. Implementation gap simply defines the variation in the policy objectives on paper and its manifestations in reality. Nigerian public policies are always having laudable objectives when they are formulated on paper, but very difficult to be executed to yield some results as expected (Celestine & Agbor 2015).

If government and the impact of its programmes must be felt, then implementation as an action part of a policy must be considered critical and taken seriously. This is because no matter how beautiful the blueprint of a programme is it becomes nonsense when its implementation is defective. There are some challenges that constitute a recurrent problem to effective implementation of policies in Nigeria:

First, the parochial and limited definition of policy objectives, this captures the fact that some policies lack clarity, leading to inconsistency with other policy goals. Interpretation difficulties may arise.

Secondly, many policies are planned without concrete data which often makes it out of the framework of reality on ground and off the basis of real data. Again, those who are the target population of a given policy are not involved from enactment to implementation stage. There are also reasons of politization leading to location deficiency.

More so, monitoring and evaluation are always shoddy thereby making it difficult to identify whether a policy is on course as intended.

Finally, corruption is seen to be inhibiting factor in the implementation process of policy design in Nigeria expressed in poor service delivery, weak accountability and poor

intergovernmental relations (Ademolekun, 2002). The lapses of policy implementation in Nigeria as aforementioned are clearly seen in the ongoing public programmes initiated to cushion the impact of *COVID-19* in Nigeria. This gap is vividly captured in discussion of findings. The three programmes are defected in terms of implementation because there is lack of data and targeted population of the programmes are misplaced in the course of implementation. Corruption is seen where people that the programmes are meant to favour are short changed.

Theoretical Framework (David Easton (1953))

System Theory

This theory is one of the theories of policy making and sees a system as a unit of whole or set of elements of which interaction takes place among them but separated by some kind of boundaries. All part works together for the proper functioning of the whole. The malfunctioning of one part can affect another. The assumption of this theory is that the environment stimulates input into the system by way of demand while the system responds by way of output. It argues therefore, that what becomes public policy is the demand from members of the society on the political system.

Therefore, *COVID-19* pandemic brought untold hardship on Nigerians, reflected in loss of jobs and hunger. It is these wants for food and job by Nigerians that has propelled government response through Nigerian Youth Investment Fund (NYIF), Special Public Work (SPW) programme and other palliative measures to ensure job opportunities and food supply to all citizens for needed satisfaction. It is only when citizens' needs are addressed through effective programmes that citizens will in turn support government policies for unity and progress.

Findings

Nigerian youth investment programme has been described by many Nigerians as a hoax. This is largely on the fact that many youths operating small businesses in Nigeria may not meet the requirements for registration for the Nigerian Youth Investment Fund (NYIF). More than 65 percent of youths running enterprises are not registered with Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) and as such do not have CAC certificate required as part of criteria for registration. Many youths do not have Tax Identification Number (TIN) and BVN as their business are to survive them on daily basis with zero saving capacity. The rigid requirements by government makes this programme to be hijacked by those who are already doing well in their businesses, thereby frustrating its essence.

More so, the Special Public Work (SPW) programme has received attacks of injustice and unfairness. The programme is said to be hijacked by top politicians and religious leaders for their family members. No transparency in the recruitment process across the country as forms were privately filled and list of successful beneficiaries displayed in various local governments without the knowledge of the less privilege who were meant to be beneficiaries. Some youths complained of identifying names who are not indigenes of their local government areas.

Youth leaders who were designated to coordinate the 400 names were not aware of any information until the list of beneficiaries were published. Lamentably, the distribution of food items as palliatives to vulnerable households remains a mirage to many Nigerians. The distribution of food items show cased high level of greed by our leaders as #ENDSARS protest revealed hoarded food in warehouses at Abuja and in different states. This culminated in wanton vandalization of public and private properties. Looting and loss of lives were recorded caused by hoarded palliatives discovered by youths. Some corrupt officials diverted the cash transfer benefits to their relative as many people in the targeted vulnerable group do not have BVN to receive their transfer.

Conclusion

Nigerian government responded to its responsibility of addressing the plights of citizens when the need arises. This is reflected in the public programmes such as Nigerian Youth Investment Fund (NYIF), Special Public Work (SPW) programme and other stimulus measures to cushion the impact of *COVID-19* on the citizens. Regrettably, the intention of government to help the poor through these programmes is defeated, propelled by greed and corruption at the implementation stage. Evidently, requirements to benefit from NYIF tend to favour a class other than the small business youths. The process of recruitment into the Special Public Work programme is accused of not being transparent. Also, food meant for the poor was hoarded by our corrupt leaders as discovered during the #ENDSARS protest; leading to more provocative action that has presented Nigeria 'black' before the entire world. The inherent corrupt attitude of Nigeria has been a major impediment at the implementation stage of every programme and has repeated itself in programmes initiative to cushion *COVID-19* impact, thereby pointing to their possible failure. The impacts of public programmes therefore are not up to the magnitude of *COVID-19* impact on citizens, as a result of corruption.

Recommendations

In emergency situations, government should shoulder some responsibilities on half of citizens. Small scale businesses should be given the opportunity to have access BVN, TIN and CAC without paying money from their pockets. Government can open accounts, obtain TIN and CAC for small enterprises owners.

Corruption should be checked by adequate supervision of the ongoing process of Special Public Work programme and same in other programmes in future for transparency and accountability. Those caught in the act of diverting food and other palliatives should be brought to book. This will serve as a deterrent forestall such nefarious behaviours in future.

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