

LACK OF ADEQUATE CITIZENS' INFORMATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF RESPONDING TO COVID 19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

A country's ability to respond adequately to any unexpected circumstance depends to a large extent on its preparedness. These can be seen in the policies, programs and plans put in place by such a nation. As such, a good planning remains the bedrock of every success. Covid-19, a novel disease which started in China took the world by surprise. The nature of its transmission coupled with the fact that it had not any known cure puts pressure on countries to devise means of curbing its spread. One of such measures was a total or partial lockdown which resulted in various forms of economic hardships. Apart from the lockdown, another most effective means of curtailing the spread of Covid 19 was tracing those who may have had contact with the infected persons. Therefore, whether to ameliorate the negative impacts of Covid 19 on the citizens through adequate social services or curtail the spread of Covid 19 by tracing those who may have had contact with the infected persons, adequate citizens' information remains a sine qua non. This paper examines the negative consequences lack of adequate citizens' information has had on Nigeria's response to Covid 19 pandemic and suggests possible remedies. Basing arguments on information mostly from already published articles and print media, the paper's position is that due to lack of adequate information of her citizens, the management of Covid 19 in Nigeria resulted in a

situation where the search for a solution became worse than the problem itself. This conclusion is informed by the fact that Covid 19 lockdown was poorly managed resulting in hunger, loss of job, a drastic decline in non-covid-19 ailment consultation in hospitals and many dead of patients with treatable sicknesses since they could not have access to medical facilities due to lockdown. Palliatives said to be distributed by the Nigerian government to alleviate the pains occasioned by the pandemic ended up enriching a few in the corridors of power and their cronies since there was and still is no information on who got what. Contact tracing of persons who may have come in contact with the infected was a herculean task due to lack of information and documentations of Nigerians.

Keywords: COVID-19, Citizens' information, Nigeria

Introduction

COVID-19, an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) broke out in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Within few months, COVID-19 spread to many countries of the globe. On 11 March 2020, the world Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19, a pandemic. Considering the infectious nature of the disease and its mortality rate, the need to reduce further transmission became pertinent. To achieve this, measures were recommended by health experts. These included regular hand cleaning with running water and soap, use of an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, maintaining a safe distance and wearing of face mask when physical distancing is not possible. In addition to all the preventive measures recommended by health experts, each country of the world took other precautionary measures to contain the spread of Covid 19.

In Nigeria, the first confirmed case was announced on 27 February 2020 of an Italian citizen in Lagos who tested positive for the virus. With the second case reported of a person in who had been in contact with the index case and more cases reported as the day went by, the federal government took more proactive measures towards containing the spread of Covid 19. Both air and land borders were shut. Lockdown was imposed in some states by the federal government starting from March 30, 2020. Subsequently, several states in Nigeria also imposed either full or partial lockdown depending on the severity of the cases in their states. Though these actions seemed as the only way out of the woods as far as curtailing the spread of Covid 19 was concerned, it was not without some negative impacts on Nigerians. Being one of the countries of the world with more than half of its citizens living in abject poverty and on daily income with no savings to fall back on during the lockdown, many citizens were at the mercy of the government and charity organizations. With anticipated help from government and other organizations not sufficient to take care of the needs of Nigerians, the Covid 19 lockdown resulted in myriad of problem such as hunger, theft, diseases, increase in prices of food stuff and avoidable deaths. Faced with the above-mentioned challenges, the Nigerian government needed to combine precautionary health measures with efforts to prevent the pandemic from destroying the lives of her vulnerable citizens.

To cushion the negative impacts of the lockdown on Nigerians, the Nigerian President promised to put in place some measures to sustain the livelihoods of workers and business owners. These measures were aimed at ensuring that citizens get through the trying times in dignified ways. As part of the palliative, vulnerable citizens were to receive conditional cash transfers for two months. Food stuff was also to be distributed to poor citizens. To this noble cause initiated by the federal government, the private sector, individuals, churches, cooperate bodies contributed both financially and through donation of food stuff.

These promises though lofty, welcomed and applauded by many were not without a big challenge. On April 1, it was reported that the Humanitarian Affairs Ministry began paying 20,000 Naira to families registered in the National Social Register of Poor and Vulnerable Households set up by the Buhari administration in 2016 to combat poverty. It was reported that each family on the register will receive monthly cash payments for four months. Unfortunately, upon the huge contributions from both the private sector, individuals, churches, cooperate bodies, the federal and state governments as palliative to help cushion the impacts of the hardships caused by the lockdown, the reality on the ground was a far cry from the promises made. As it is always the case, these payments reached only a fraction of the Nigerians out of many who may have needed the expected assistance. According to Human Rights Watch, “These payments are likely to reach only a fraction of the Nigerians who will need economic assistance” (Nigeria: Protect Most Vulnerable in COVID-19 Response). According the Human Right Watch, the National Social Register included 11,045,537 people from 2,644,493 households, far fewer than the over 90 million Nigerians estimated to live in extreme poverty, on less than \$1.90 a day. Judging from the outcry from Nigerians, one wonders why, upon all that was claimed to have been spent by both the state and federal governments, many citizens who could have benefited as intended from the palliative never had a taste of it.

Again, due to negative biting effects of Covid 19 lockdown, a large number of citizens disobeyed the lockdown order in their attempt to make ends meet. Unfortunately, some who disobeyed the lockdown rules were apprehended by the law enforcement agents. In some cases, the attempt at arresting citizens who disobeyed the lockdown rules resulted in violent confrontation causing the dead of many Nigerians. The lockdown and its enforcement at its initial stage led to some avoidable deaths that could be blamed on government negligence. Irrespective of the positive aspects of Covid 9 palliative and lockdown, fears remained that the number of deaths as a result of lockdown measures could have superseded those killed by the Covid 19 infection. Many patients with already known ailments and

managed in various hospitals could not access medicare either due to their inability to scale through security checks mounted by security agents or the fear of their safety in the already bad and substandard medical facilities dotted all over the country.

When one considers the inability of poor Nigerians to access the various palliative offered by various groups to ameliorate the pains and hardship occasioned by the Covid 19 lockdown, the avoidable deaths caused by lack of access to medical facilities and mismanagement of the lockdown which affected health services, the difficulty in tracing persons who would have had contacts with infected persons due to lack of citizens' information base and other adverse effects of Covid 19 lockdown, one may not avoid the temptation of concluding that the management of Covid 19 in Nigeria ended up being a deal with the devil as the search for prevention and a cure turned out to be worse than the disease itself.

Unlike modalities adopted in developed countries of the world in reaching out to its citizens through proper information of citizens, Nigeria since 2006 has based her population figures on estimation which keeps on bettering the lots of few who are politically connected. If a country's ability to response adequately to unforeseen circumstance depends to a large extent on its preparedness seen in the policies, programs and plans put in place by such a nation, lack of proper information about her citizens impacted negatively on Nigerian's response to the challenge posed by Covid 19 pandemic.

Covid-19 Pandemic: A General Overview

The Covid -19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic, is currently a pandemic ravaging the world. According to World Health Organization (*WHO*), Covid-19 is caused by "severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The disease was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. World Health Organization *declared* the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern in January 2020, and a pandemic in March 2020. As of 16 October 2020, as reported by Covid-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University "more than 39.1 million cases have been confirmed, with more than 1.1 million deaths attributed to Covid-19".

Mode of Transmission

Covid-19 is a respiratory illness. Its primary medium of transmission is person-to-person contact. This is affirmed by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control who stated that “Covid 19 spreads very easily and sustainably through the air, primarily through small droplets and sometimes in aerosols, as an infected person breathes, coughs, sneezes, talks, or sings”. It is also proven to be transmitted through “contact with contaminated surfaces, although this has not been conclusively demonstrated (*“Transmission of SARS-CoV-2: implications for infection prevention precautions” (PDF)*). Also, Covid 19 can “spread from an infected person for up to two days prior to symptom onset and from people who are asymptomatic”(*European Centre for Diseases Prevention and Control*). In addition to being infected, people remain infectious for seven to twelve days in moderate cases and up to two weeks in severe cases (*“Q & A on COVID-19: Basic facts*).

Symptoms

Common symptoms of Covid 19 include fever, cough, fatigue, breathing difficulties, and loss of smell. Complications may include pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome. The incubation period is typically around five days but may range from one to 14 days.

Prevention

Recommended preventive measures include hand washing, covering of mouth or wearing face mask when sneezing or coughing, social distancing, disinfecting surfaces, ventilation and air-filtering, monitoring and self-isolation if exposed or symptomatic.

Treatment

To date, there are no specific vaccines or medicines for Covid-19 treatments. Treatments are under investigation. As such all Covid 19 patients are managed with drugs that have the potency of treating the symptoms associated with it and those that can boost human immune system to prevent complications.

COVID-19 in Nigeria

The first confirmed case in Nigeria was announced on 27 February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus. On 9 March 2020, a second case of the virus was reported of a man in Ewekoro, Ogun State, who had contact with the Italian citizen. As at October 16, 2020, according to the Nigerian government official website “ Nigeria has 61, 194 confirmed cases, 7771 active cases, 52,304 recovery, 1,119 deaths, and 1.83% fatality rate (covid19.ncdc.gov.ng).

The Nigerian Government’s Response to Covid 19 Pandemic

On January 23, 2020, the World Health Organization’s International Health Regulations (IHR) Emergency Committee advised that “all countries should be prepared for containment, including active surveillance, early detection, isolation and case management, contact tracing and prevention of onward spread of 2019-nCoV infection, and to share full data with WHO” (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development>). With this instruction from WHO coupled with concern for the wellbeing of its citizens, to control the spread of the Covid 19 pandemic, both the federal and states government in Nigeria imposed total or partial lockdowns on human activities from March 25. The nature and intensity of these lockdowns varied by state and over the first three months. Many states had lockdowns for three to four days a week. In some others, the lockdowns restricted some movements at night. Most states also complied with federal government directives which included:

- Imposition of curfew within specific hours in the night;
- Closure of all schools;
- Suspension of all religious and social gatherings of all sorts;
- Closure of all airports both international and domestic;
- Limitation of any form of gathering including burials, birthday parties and weddings to a specific numbers that could be controlled;
- Reduction of market days to very few days in a week;
- Reduction in public transportation carrying capacity;

- Restriction on inter-state travel;
 - Reduction in working hours for only few cadres of public service.
- As would have been expected, the above measures, though aimed at reducing the spread of Covid 19 among the Nigerian citizens was not without its negative effects. The restrictions on movement of people reduced availability of hired labour as many peasants in Nigeria live on a day to day income. Shortage of hired labour adversely affected agricultural activities as the outbreak occurred during farming. Labour shortage further reduced the availability of farm produce leading to a spike in the price of food stuff.

Furthermore, a reduction in the working hours resulted in only a few and selected number of customers being attended to per day. Selective branch closures by banks and other credit facilities negatively impacted credit accessibility. Exceptionally long queues were noticed at bank ATMs, bank entrances, shops, markets (on days they were opened).

As reported by *Thisday Newspaper* of 15th May 2020, there was a serious decline in non-covid-19 ailment consultation in hospitals. The federal government according to *Thisday Newspaper* “expressed concern about the disruption unleashed on the nation’s healthcare system since the onset of COVID-19, which has resulted in a significant drop in the number of outpatient population of non-COVID-19 ailments in hospitals nationwide”. According to Chuks Okocha, Olawale Ajimotokan, Onyebuchi Ezigbo , Eromosele Abiodun, Martins Ifijeh, Nume Ekeghe and Peter Uzoho of *Thisday Newspaper* “data showed a 50 per cent reduction in the number of outpatient cases from four million people to two million while antenatal patients slumped to 655,000 from 1.3m and immunisation figures halved”. The Minister of Health, Dr. Osagie Ehanire as quoted in the same Newspaper corroborated this when he stated that

Latest statistics from the National Health Management Information System (NHMIS) indicates that outpatient visit has dropped from four million to about two million; antenatal visits from 1.3 million to 655,000, skilled birth attendance from 158,374 to less than 99,000 while immunisation services reduced to about half.

This implies that many Nigerians with known health challenges could not have access to medicare because of the lockdown and restriction of movement. This surely must have resulted in lots of avoidable deaths. Recognizing the danger this decline could pose to the health and wellbeing of Nigerians, the minister for health assured Nigerians that these failings in healthcare services with yet-to-be-determined consequences will considerably be addressed by the easing of the lockdown.

To further cushion the negative impacts of the lockdown, the federal government of Nigeria rolled out some palliative measures targeted at some vulnerable groups. To petty traders and artisans across Nigeria who were involved in Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP) scheme of the Federal Government and had gotten loan from the Bank of Industry, Bank of Agriculture, and the Nigeria Export and Import Bank, the federal government granted three months interest holidays. To those involved in MarketMoni, Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP), social intervention programs of the federal government for market women and traders, artisans, youth and farmers, the federal government through the Bank of Industry has given beneficiaries loans ranging from N10,000 to N100,000 per applicant for as long as 6 months. So far, according to online information obtained from <http://www.marketmoni.com.ng/>, over 24,000 beneficiaries have accessed *MarketMoni*. There were other initiatives from the federal government such as FarmerMoni a “Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) Initiative created to boost the Nigerian economy through leverage and access to finance for farmers through the provision of collateral free loans” (Isaac Omo-Ehiabhi Eranga, 220) which assisted farmer in acquiring loans ranging from N300,000 to N2,000,000 repayable within six months.

In addition to the above financial relieve, President Mohammad Buhari announced an expansion of the initial number of households that would benefit from the direct distribution of food and cash from 2.6 million households to 3.6 million households, who were considered the most vulnerable in the society. The ministries of Industry, Trade and Investment; Communication and Digital Economy; Science and Technology; Transportation; Interior; Health;

Works and Housing; Labor and Employment; and Education, were to “jointly develop a comprehensive policy for a Nigerian economy functioning with Covid 19 pandemic” (Isaac 221).

The Challenge to Effective Government’s Response to Covid 19 Pandemic

Ordinarily, with all the efforts both by the states and federal governments at cushioning the negative impacts of Covid 19 on its citizens, one would not have expected much lamentations from Nigerians. But, unfortunately, the reverse has been the case. While much lamentation trailed the distribution of government palliatives to the masses, many who would have benefited from the grants offered through the banks could not, for other reasons. Bringing to the fore the complaint of the masses regarding the pains Nigerians are going through due to Covid 19 lockdown, *Business Day* on April 19, 2020, reported thus:

It is lamentation and bitter wailing in Lagos and parts of the country as Nigerians complain that the stimulus packages announced by the Federal and Lagos State governments to cushion the effects of the lockdown imposed on some States and the Federal Capital Territory to contain the further spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have not been sincerely deployed.

According to the newspaper, the citizens alleged that the process of distribution of whatever that may have been made available for that purpose had been politicized and hijacked by a few.

It could be recalled that the federal government of Nigeria had earlier said the palliatives were for the most vulnerable in the society. But in a country like Nigeria without any comprehensive information about her citizens, what could have been the parameters for determining who was most qualified to be classed among the most vulnerable? For example, according to Isaac, in Edo State, “most of the residents claimed they were not aware if there was any distribution of palliatives in their localities” (“COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: Palliative Measures and the Politics of Vulnerability” 221). The same was common in almost all the states in the country. It was generally alleged that the palliatives were hijacked by politicians. Till today,

neither the state nor the federal government has been able to for records purposes to provide any adequate information on who got what. The questions that federal and state governments have not been able to answer is: who are the vulnerable in Nigeria? What criteria must be met into to be classified as a vulnerable person? Is it that the federal government has been unable to evolve a transparent process towards ensuring fair distribution of the palliatives? Or, is the idea of undefined vulnerability a ploy by the governments to hijack the palliatives for their cronies?

Apart from the fraud which characterized palliative distribution by the various levels of governments, Covid 19 wrong management has had its health impacts. Tracing effectively those who would have had contact with infected person has been a herculean task. In an article titled “COVID-19: PTF Decries Nigerians Refusal To Help With Contact Tracing” the *Punch Newspaper* of June 5, 2020, reported Mr. Boss Mustapha, Chairman, PTF on COVID-19 and Secretary to the Government of the Federation expressing displeasure and worry over the refusal of some Nigerians to help with contact tracing and going into isolation after testing positive. But, what is the possibility of tracing citizens in a country such as Nigeria who conducted her last census in 2006 and who over the years has based her information and planning on projections? The difficulty in rendering social services without adequate information is better buttressed by Yomi Kazeem, who querying the inability of the federal government to have comprehensive information of her citizens opined Sure, there are estimates (180 million or 200 million, depending on who you ask) but the country’s last census happened in 2006 and plans for another have, so far, stalled due to lack of funding. The 2006 exercise arrived at a population count of 140 million but alleged malpractice suggest those results cannot be fully trusted. As such, Nigeria’s problematic relationship with data is best captured by its decades-long politicization of census numbers. (<https://qz.com/africa/1725537/africa-has-a-data-problem-says-mo-ibrahim-governance-report/>).

The Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari in his official twitter handle on Oct 9, 2019 commenting on lack of exact reliable figure about Nigeria’s population asserted “today, most of the

statistics quoted about Nigeria are developed abroad by the World Bank, IMF and other foreign bodies. Some of these statistics are wild estimates that bear little relation to the facts on the ground”. Mr Aliyu Aziz, the Director-General, National Identity Management Commission (NIMC), on 16 September 2020 speaking during an interactive session with members of the media to commemorate the 2020 National Identity Day as reported by *The Guardian Newspaper* affirmed the lack of adequate information of her citizens when he said that the commission has at September 16, 2020 so far registered only 42 million Nigerians on the national identity database. When one remembers that Nigerians are estimated to be 200million out of which only 42 million have so far been registered, one can only imagine how impossible it is to plan adequately. Aziz in line with the theme of the 2020 celebration “Identity for Health, Sustainable Development and Growth” reiterated the importance of citizens’ information when he noted “that the idea behind the introduction of digital Identity Ecosystem was to enable the government to have easy access to accurate data of citizens for the provision of social services”. Thus, without information, planning remains elusive. Quoting Yannick Lefang, founder of Kasi Insight, a consumer data-focused research firm on why most countries in African may not be readily interested in taking the pains to have an accurate census, Yomi Kazeem says

The problem with government statistics is that you need to have the breadth and depth. It takes time and resources and, as we know, statistics agencies in Africa have been underfunded over time,” he says. “What’s been happening is that because it’s so cumbersome and costly, basically we’ve done nothing.” A more cynical view is that the lack of availability of data locally enables a culture which lacks transparency and allows political leaders paint their preferred versions of reality

Data, says Michael Famoroti, partner at Stears Data, a Lagos-based research firm “helps uncover truth and, in Nigeria, it has been better for the people that run the country for data to not be available,” to the surprise of many Nigerians, citizens keep registering the same information all over the place such as registration of sim card, biometric capturing at the place of work, voter’s card, bank BVN etc,

meanwhile one data set could have been sufficient for all these agencies.

The Way Forward for Nigeria

One great lesson life has taught all is the need to be ever ready for the unexpected. The best way to achieve success in this regard is to be ever prepared. As noted above, the management of Covid 19 lockdown in Nigeria brought some unintended consequences. Nigerians were hungry. Jobs were lost. Many avoidable deaths were recorded. To many low income Nigerians who were caught unexpected and with no saving for situations like such, the intensity and duration of the lockdown was unnecessary and had brought about severe hardship. Though erroneously, many have believed that Covid 19 is a disease of the wealthy and privileged class, and that most of the actions by government agencies are efforts by politicians to dubiously acquire personal wealth. These may have partly accounted for why regulations such as social distancing, wearing a mask, and hand sanitising are not taken very seriously by many people. No wonder while government sources attribute the low Covid 19 infection and death rates in Nigeria to its proactive lockdown actions, many Nigerians praise their own resilience in terms of natural immunity and God's protection as the key to overcoming Covid 19.

Furthermore, though the CBN is said to have provided N50 billion to firms affected by the virus, increased credit to the health sector, the Bankers Committee pledged to provide N3.5 trillion in support to pharmaceutical companies, assist essential health companies in purchasing raw materials, and encouraging local production of drugs, while the federal, states and local governments gave out cash and other items as palliatives to the most vulnerable, the persistent outcry from Nigerians show that all is not well. The inability of any of the tiers of government to provide adequate information on the modalities with which these palliatives was distributed or the list of those who benefited creates more doubt in any thinking mind about how genuine the process was. As was done in many civilized and better organized countries of the world, the US which is currently the epicenter of the virus, approved a coronavirus relief bill of \$2 trillion. It was designed to bolster unemployment

benefits for individuals, increase money for states, deliver a huge bailout fund for businesses and pay up to \$1,200 to every American with an annual income of \$75,000 or less. Unlike what was obtainable in Nigeria, a clue on who was qualified to benefit from this US stimulus package as reported by *news18.com/news* says

All Americans who filed tax returns for the years 2018 or 2019 and meet the income requirements below, as well as Social Security beneficiaries who typically don't file a tax return, will qualify for an economic impact relief payment. The money will arrive automatically, either through direct deposit or physical check.

On how to check and confirm reception of the stimulus, *news18.com/news* further reports "most Americans do not need to take action to receive their stimulus check at this time. The IRS (Internal Revenue Service of the U.S, responsible for the collection of taxes and enforcement of tax laws) will automatically calculate your payment based on your 2018 or 2019 tax returns and send a payment". All American citizens were to periodically check the IRS website for additional information. Below is the a breakdown of who got was to get what from stimulus package of the US government as obtained from <https://www.news18.com/news/world/> website on october 10th, 2020.

1. Individuals:

- Income < \$75,000 will receive the full \$1,200.
- Income > \$75,000 will have \$5 taken from that \$1,200 for every \$100 they earn above \$75,000.
- Income > \$99,000 will not be eligible for payment.

2. Married Couples:

- Income < \$150,000 will receive a total of \$2,400.
- Income > \$150,000 will have \$5 taken from that \$2,400 for every \$100 they earn above \$150,000.
- No children and income > \$198,000 will not be eligible for payment.

3. Other Beneficiaries:

- Social Security beneficiaries will receive \$1,200 through direct deposit.

- Parents with children ages 16 and under will receive an additional \$500.
- Parents with children ages 17 or 18 will not receive an additional \$500.
- College students ages 19 to 23 whose parents pay for more than half of their expenses and claim them on their tax returns will not receive a payment.

While the above analysis shows that the American stimulus package was not only well-tailored to citizens but had immediate and positive impact on the standard of living of its citizenry, and may have reduced the knock-on effects on incomes, that of Nigeria was shielded in secrecy. Nigeria could not and is still very far from achieving such feat because the basis for such an achievement which is proper information of her citizen is lacking in Nigeria.

The herculean task of contact tracing which also impaired government response to Covid 19 could have been reduced should there have been proper citizen's information. From whichever angle one wish to look at it, effective decisions about how to allocate resources is only achievable when there is proper planning and comprehensive information. When a country has a planning process and a plan to follow, such a country is better equipped to prepare for the future. When a country has a plan in place, it is better-equipped to handle uncertainty. Lack of adequate citizens' information is a serious threat to Nigeria's proper response not only to Covid 19 pandemic in Nigeria but to proper planning. Though a lot of harm has already been done, the truth remains that if better steps are not taken on time to have a reliable information base and correct population, Nigeria's the future remains very bleak as far as our response to unprepared situations is concerned.

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