



Research Article

Peasantry and COVID-19 Palliatives in Nigeria

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Abstract: The study generally aimed to examine peasantry and COVID-19 palliatives in Nigeria. The study specifically aimed to explore factors that made COVID-19 a threat to peasantry in Nigeria. It also aimed to critically consider the benefits of COVID-19 palliatives to peasantry in Nigeria. The study adopted Marxian political economy approach as its theoretical framework. The Marxian political economy approach offered an explanation regarding human relations in the production process and why some people enjoy wealth while others are impoverished in the society. The study was essentially a qualitative one and secondary data were used to generate relevant information. Critical method was also employed. The results from the study indicated that the gap in infrastructure delivery stood out to worsen COVID-19 crisis situation among the peasantries in Nigeria. The results also revealed the insincerity of political leaders who tend to politicise COVID-19 palliatives supports to their own advantage and at the expense of the peasantry. The study concluded that COVID-19 palliatives tended to develop the pockets of the political elites at the expense of the peasantry who were the most vulnerable to the crisis. To address this situation, the political elites in Nigeria need to focus on the well-being of the citizens rather than their own private pockets.

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INTRODUCTION

Many countries in the world faced the COVID-19 crisis which at the beginning was likened to an ordinary flu but on 30th January and 11th March, 2020, was declared a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" and "Pandemic" respectively by the World Health Organization (WHO) [1, 2]. The crisis which had affected an enormous amount of people worldwide, first emerged in Wuhan, China, at the beginning of December 2019 when a 55-year old man was diagnosed with a new disease caused by a new virus SARS-CoV-2 and had spread to over 209 countries [3, 4].

With countries closing their borders, announcing lockdowns and people asked to follow protective measures, Van Prooijen & Douglas [35] described the whole issue as a societal crisis with impactful and rapid societal change that called existing power structures, norms of conduct, or even the existence of specific people or groups into question. UNDP [6] posited that what began as a

health crisis had become economic and fiscal crisis with negative social implications, especially for oil export revenues dependent countries like Nigeria. Also, Figueiredo [3] asserted that the last interesting aspect was that COVID-19 had manifested itself in an increasingly worrying way in some of the most less-privileged communities in the world.

Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, there were still communities in Nigeria without basic service delivery especially healthcare facilities as well as health workers [7, 1]. Similarly, Laah, Abba, Ishaya, & Gana [8] declared that over 50% Nigerians reside in communities which were generally deprived of the basic needs of life. The likely implication of this given the pandemic is that a bad situation could degenerate into the worse for Nigeria if no attention is paid in this direction.

Statement of the Problem

Societal crisis attracts loss both to the privileged and the less-privileged households. In

absolute terms, the privileged households lose more assets or income from societal crisis because they have more assets and higher incomes, while, in relative terms, the less-privileged households lose more in terms of livelihoods and well-being [5].

Tanhan, *et al.* [9] asserted that COVID-19 was a crisis which have attracted loss both to the privileged and the less-privileged households. Woodhill [10] indicated that the peasantry belonged to the less-privileged households because they were more vulnerable in the society. Alluding to this, Techno Serve - Business Solutions to Poverty [11] asserted that peasants were now faced with immediate threats to their survival and a difficult road to recovery.

Furthermore, going by the measures put in place by different countries to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis, Tanhan, *et al.* [9] listed physical and social distance rules, vacating all schools cum places of worship and related buildings, staying at home, stopping intra and inter states transportations; supporting online classes or distant education. However, Woodhill [10] observed that typically among the less-privileged households, there would be very limited medical facilities to cope and that social distancing measures would prove impractical to implement. Ogali [12] wrote that peasantry question in Nigeria had remained largely unanswered due to the marginalisation of this all important productive force.

Again, Woodhill [10] clearly stated that particularly the peasantry would be badly affected by the COVID-19 crisis and therefore highly dependent on palliative support measures to cope and to avoid hunger, malnutrition and exacerbated inequality and poverty.

In view of the above, this study investigated the topic by answering the following questions:

- 1) What were the factors that made COVID-19 a threat to peasantry in Nigeria?
- 2) What are the benefits of COVID-19 palliatives to peasantry in Nigeria?

Objectives of the Study

Generally, this study aimed to examine peasantry and the management of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Specifically, the study aimed to:

- 1) Explore the factors that made COVID-19 a threat to peasantry in Nigeria.
- 2) Critically consider the benefits of COVID-19 palliatives to peasantry in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Marxist political economy approach as its preferred theoretical framework. Roemer [5] traced this approach to the

work of Karl Marx which centred on class dominance and exploitation. Alluding to this, Mazi Mba [11] declared that the peasantry was getting more disadvantaged due to exploitation by the political elites who in turn were getting richer at the expense of the peasantry.

Expounding the above, Roemer [5] noted that Marxist political economy aimed to resolve the puzzle behind the exploitative relationship between the workaholic peasantry and the privileged elites who enjoy wealth at their expense. Also, Tenuche & Ogwo [13] observed that there was an exploitative tendency between the elites, especially the ruling class and the peasantry. The Marxist political economy offered an explanation regarding human relations in the production process, a relationship that was fundamentally advantageous to a particular group, while the other was at disadvantage [12].

Concept of COVID-19

Defining COVID-19, Ghada & Aseel [14] termed it coronaviruses (CoV) which they described as a large family of viruses that cause flu in humans. Ghada & Aseel [14] citing Paules, Marston, & Fauci [15], further noted that COVID-19 was zoonotic, meaning that it could be transmitted from animals to people. Giving more clarification, Eranga [16] explained the acronym: 'CO' as corona, 'VI' as virus, 'D' as disease, and '19' as 2019, while also noting that the virus was transmittable through direct contact with the respiratory droplets of an infected person (generated through coughing and sneezing), or by touching surfaces that were contaminated by the virus and at the same time touching one's face; eyes, nose or mouth [16].

Identifying COVID-19 symptoms, Tanhan, *et al.* [9] included cough, fever, and shortness of breath. Also, Lin, *et al.* [17] citing Wu & McGoogan [18] observed that there were cases of mild symptom (without pneumonia or only mild pneumonia), severe case with difficulty breathing, and critical cases with respiratory failure, septic shock, and/or multiple organ dysfunction or failure.

Also, Jakovljevic, Bjedov, Jaksic, & Jakovljevic [2] noted that COVID-19 was a highly contagious disease spreading from human to human relentlessly and rapidly all over the world. Furthermore, Jakovljevic, Bjedov, Jaksic, & Jakovljevic [2] viewed it as a hybrid warfare; implying, a war between countries using coronavirus and or a war against the virus which wages war against humans. While, Figus [3] described it as a health problem that had become a global issue threatening the social security of people.

Impacts of COVID-19

Tanhan, *et al.* [9] noted that COVID-19 had become a pandemic which severely affect the less-privileged households. Also, Techno Serve - Business Solutions to Poverty [10] submitted that COVID-19 crisis was indeed threatening the survival of the less-privileged households consequent of the preventive and control measures against the COVID-19.

Jakovljevic, Bjedov, Jaksic, & Jakovljevic [2] citing Farmer, B. [19] asserted that COVID-19 had instilled serious fear on mankind particularly the peasants. While, Figus [3] noted that the longer anyone was exposed to a polluted environment, the more likely the respiratory system becomes weaker and more fragile in fighting against the effects of COVID-19. Woodhill [10] noted that the peasants as vulnerable groups would be particularly at risk due to the depth of their poverty, reduced remittances and the limited capacity of the state to respond.

Social networks and systems which provided support as well as regulated well-being of the less-privileged households were weakened and potentially could degenerate into more crisis due to the restrictive non-pharmaceutical measures put in place like implementing isolation measures, social distancing and quarantine [6]. The impact of COVID-19 on the older population had been the greatest, especially in Italy where the average age in the fatal cases was 79 years old [6].

Paradoxically, due to infodemics everyone had a private opinion and alternative truth about COVID-19, people became confused, irrational, anxious, fearful, suspicious, xenophobic and more prone to extreme behaviours; more so infodemic was explained as the rapid spread of information of all kinds, including rumors, gossip, unreliable information, misinformation, and theories of conspiracy among others [2]. Supporting this, United Nations [20] stated that Covid-19 gave rise to a new wave of hate speech and discrimination including scapegoating, stereotyping, stigmatization and the use of derogatory, misogynistic, racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic or antisemitic language. The dissemination of 'disinformation' or 'misinformation'.

Noting the significant impact of COVID-19 on the less-privileged households, Woodhill [10] citing World Bank observed that many low-income informal workers who had no healthcare or social safety nets migrated from the cities back to the rural communities.

COVID-19 Palliatives

Jakovljevic, Bjedov, Jaksic, & Jakovljevic [2] and UNDP [6] suggested that public relations and

creative cum proactive communication measures were among crucial COVID-19 palliatives to scale up public awareness and sensitisation on the gravity of the crisis and its implications on different age groups and people with compromising health conditions.

However, Hallegatte, Vogt-Schilb, Bangalore, & Rozenberg [21] stated that palliatives had to address the well-being of the people but not all about information on the severity, trends and costs of the crisis. Alluding to this, Woodhill [10] remarked that the most critical palliative was food for the people and that keeping food flowing to the privileged and less-privileged households at affordable prices must be a key priority in responding to COVID-19 crisis.

Again, Jakovljevic, Bjedov, Jaksic, & Jakovljevic [2] citing Harari Y.N. [22], identified trust between and among mankind; people need to trust scientific experts, citizens need to trust public authorities, and countries need to trust one another, noting that this was the palliative needed as what faced humanity was a societal crisis which got worse due to the lack of trust.

Vanhaute [23] stated that the peasantry needs support in order to localise food power and have control over local food production system and food market. Alluding to this, Ogali [12] believed that the empowerment of the peasant producers will promote self-sufficient and self-reliant economy. Lending credence to the above, Woodhill [10] declared that the less-privileged households would require external support measures to cope with the crisis as well as to avoid hunger, malnutrition and exacerbated poverty and inequality.

In difference to the above, Ajibola [24] submitted that the less-privileged households should be encouraged to venture into backyard gardening to serve as additional nutrients to meet daily household dietary needs.

Woodhill [10] wrote that now more than ever, foresight thinking was needed for recovery from and a system that ensures resilient against the current crisis. While noting that some people were using unscientific and unprofessional measures to address the crisis, Tanhan, *et al.* [9] stated that the government should take the advantage of the crisis to provide specific missing infrastructure to the less-privileged households. Supporting this point, Bisson, Schmauder, & Claes [7] noted that health delivery was an important component in this regard and that COVID-19 was an opportunity for policy-makers to increase consultation with affected communities and to engage in locally acceptable solutions. While

identifying disbursing of funds and food items as palliatives, Kalu [25] urged the government to aim at protecting its citizens and provide them with the necessary commodities or funds as palliatives. Similarly, Adedayo, Sennuga, & Sennuga [26] recommended that the less-privileged households should be given access to micro loans as palliatives.

Techno Serve - Business Solutions to Poverty [27] suggested timely, well-targeted support which included help to adopt a survival mindset (new emotional needs), develop financial resilience, and adjust business model to changing market needs and opportunities. To Vanhaute [23], palliative was about the diversification of income and coping strategies.

In the context of this study, COVID-19 palliatives refer to measures, which include disbursing of relief material, funds and food items to those most affected by the COVID-19.

Concept of Peasantry

Ogali [12] writing from the perspective of Chayanov, A [28], observed that peasantry was a unique mode of production (which could still be found in advanced nations including China, France, Russia, and Spain, as well as many developing countries in this 21st century). Feuerbacher, McDonald, & Thierfelder [29] wrote that that peasantry account for a large proportion of rural populations and that it heavily dependent upon the physical labour of members of the household to sustain their livelihoods.

Ahiauza [30] citing Teodor Shanin [31] viewed peasants as "small agricultural producers who, with the help of simple equipment and labour of their families, produce mainly for own consumption and for the fulfilment of obligation to the holders of political power". Notable in this remark was that the peasants often perform certain rites because it had always been done that way. Also, Ogali [12] observed that in societies with substantial peasant presence there was always surplus production and the manner of extraction of this surplus by State officials was generally political, revealing a pattern of unequal distribution of power.

Describing peasantry as the less-privileged households, Okeke & Imaga [32] remarked that the defining attributes of peasantry included deprivation and possession of contentious rights in the midst of its apparent contributions to the well-being of the society. Categorically, Edelman [33] posited that the peasantry generally engage in multiple forms of livelihood, including agriculture, wage labour, pastoralism and livestock production, artisanal crafts production, fishing and hunting,

gathering of plant or mineral resources, petty commerce, and a variety of other skilled and unskilled occupations. Also, Woodhill [10] stated that the livelihoods of the peasantry were connected at least in part to the production, processing and distribution of food, and suggesting that other members of the society depend on the work of the peasantry.

Contributing, Ahiauza [30] citing Eric Wolf [34] defined peasantry as a class excluding fishermen or landless labourers and some category of farmers who were active participants in the market. Notable in this view is that the peasants (so to say) were not active participants in the market, though may sell but not to make profit rather to enable them purchase those things which they do not produce. Lending credence to this, Ogali [12] declared that the peasants naturally depend on the use of crude implements to produce primarily for subsistence without being motivated by the drive for profit.

Considering that it could coexist in a person on multiple ground, Edelman [33] citing Edelman, Marc [33] defined peasantry as a form of identity and self-ascription. Furthermore, Edelman [33] stated that peasantry had a long and complicated history that reflected their political and social subordination in the society. Adding to this, Okeke & Imaga [32] identified neo-peasants which they termed peasantized civil servants.

Edelman [33] citing Edelman, M [33] noted that peasantry at times implicated rural elites, including large landowners, who sought to euphemize their position and claimed to be "peasants" for political or other purposes. Nevertheless, Vanhaute [23] warned that peasantry should not be seen a victim of the present nor treated as a remnant of the past.

In the context of this study, peasantry refers to the rural poor, small-scale or small-holding farmers, the deprived, vulnerable and less-privileged households in the society.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted Qualitative design. The data collection method emphasised secondary sources and the method of analysis was mainly qualitative and critical. This was necessary as the study essentially made use of documentary analysis. Relevant scholarly publications were extensively sourced from journal articles and the internet. Data analysis was based on the Marxist political economy approach in recognition of the constant and

dialectical interaction between economic and political forces in shaping human societies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Peasantry and COVID-19 Threats in Nigeria

The study aimed to explore the factors that made COVID-19 a threat to peasantry in Nigeria. On February 27th 2020, the first official case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was announced [25]. Amzat, *et al.* [1] noted that during the first 30 days of COVID-19 in Nigeria, the disease distribution was thought to be for the privileged populations only.

Differently, Kalu [25] stated that Nigeria, just as with the rest of the world, was facing the realities of COVID-19 crisis, but in a somewhat different fashion largely due to the seeming shocks being witnessed by the government. UNDP [6] gave a good description of these shocks; first was the shock from decline in oil prices by more than 55% between the end of 2019 to March 2020, which was one of the most serious economic shocks that Nigeria had faced in its memory, especially as the oil sector contributed 65% and 90% to government and total export revenues, respectively. Another shock was due to lack of demand which reduced domestic oil supply, which further limited the ability of government to cope with the pandemic. Furthermore, disruption occurred to supply chain distributions due to restrictions to movement of people. Worse still, naira came under severe pressure as the exchange rate depreciated by 1.0% since mid-February 2020. Also, inflation rate was raised due to shortage of consumer good in the event of disruptions to imports and local supply, particularly as Nigeria was a net importer of basic foodstuff. Notably still, was the initial panic buying even when prices and supply of goods were unaffected, and also significant job losses were recorded [6].

Interestingly, Kalu [25] declared that the health system in Nigeria before the pandemic was nearly non-existent; noting that even in most of the cities, health systems were completely dilapidated as they have not received adequate attention; and that infact political leaders contributed to health system collapse by encouraging medical tourism. Similarly, Amzat, *et al.* [1] observed that public health education in Nigeria was vague, which account for the medico-centric and reactionary reponse to the COVID-19 in Nigeria as the federal and state governments only set up isolation centers after positive cases were confirmed in the country.

Laah, Abba, Ishaya, & Gana [8] noted that the many development programmes in the areas

inhabited by the less-privileged households were so superficially implemented that the targeted people were usually forced to doubt the sincerity of the programme initiators. Ogali [12] observed that though the peasants were the main productive force and that their labour sustain the society, the realities in Nigeria was to find some executed projects among these less-privileged households as either to satisfy the comfort or massage the ego of particular persons.

Considering the implication of the above, UNDP [6] pointed out that enforcing social distancing in such neglected areas would be very difficult, just it was also observed that peasantry faced the risk of further fragmenting the social values – and the very safety nets required for healing and recovery due to the crisis.

In the same vein, Ajibola [24] submitted that the lockdown situation affected linkages between major metropolis in the various States in Nigeria and also had implications on supply and distribution of agricultural inputs (fertilizers, herbicides and improved seeds) to the peasants.

Critical of the lockdown and enforcement measures in Nigeria, Kalu [25] wrote that many peasants could not earn a living during the period; and that the condition forced them to disobey the lockdown order but were either apprehended or killed by overzealous security personnel; making the combined effort of the overzealous security personnel in enforcing the lockdown the cause of more deaths than the COVID-19 itself in Nigeria. Identifying another serious threat, Ogali [12] declared that the need for (or attraction to) modern wares and tastes could indeed sideline and gradually threaten the continue existence of peasantry in Nigeria.

COVID-19 Palliatives and Peasantry in Nigeria

The study also set out to critically interrogate the benefits of COVID-19 palliatives to peasantry in Nigeria. Egwemi & Odo [27] wrote that peasantry in Nigeria was associated with poverty, and subsistence agricultural production. Considering them as the main productive force in Nigeria, Ogali [12] opined that the material well-being of the peasants which still operated with crude equipment, should be the primary basis of socio-economic development in the country. In a bid to cushion the effect of COVID-19 crisis, about 3.6 million less-privileged households were to benefit from direct distribution of food and cash [16].

Giving an in-depth analysis, Eranga [16] wrote that as a way of cushioning the effect of the lockdown, the Nigeria government rolled out the

following palliative measures for targeted groups: three months interest holidays for those holding Tradermoni, Marketmoni, and Farmermoni loans issued by the Bank of Industry, Bank of Agriculture, and the Nigeria Export and Import Bank.

Furthermore, Tradermoni stood for a loan program of the Federal Government, created specifically for petty traders and artisans across the country. It is a part of the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program scheme of the Federal Government, being executed by the Bank of Industry. With TraderMoni, an individual could receive interest-free loans starting from ₦10,000 and growing all the way to ₦100,000 as the person pays back. Beneficiaries get ₦10,000 as the first loan. When they pay back the first loan, they immediately qualify for a second loan of ₦15,000. After payback of the second loan, they qualify for a ₦20,000 loan and then ₦50,000, and then ₦100,000.

Also, Marketmoni which stood as the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP), issued interest-free loans to market women and traders, artisans, youth and farmers. It was one of the social intervention programs of the Federal Government being executed by the Bank of Industry. MarketMoni had kicked off disbursements to its early set of beneficiaries and was expanding across the country. Beneficiaries receive loans ranging from ₦10,000 to ₦100,000 per applicant for as long as 6 months. MarketMoni attracted no interest except a one-time 5% administrative fee [16].

Another was the FarmerMoni which also was Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme Initiative created to boost the Nigerian economy through leverage and access to finance for farmers. FarmerMoni was designed to help petty traders expand their trade through the provision of collateral free loans. The loans were repayable over a period of six months. Under the scheme, beneficiaries could get access to a higher facility ranging from ₦300,000 to ₦2,000,000 when they repay within the stipulated time period [16].

Looking at the benefits of COVID-19 palliatives to peasantry in Nigeria, Kalu [25] observed that the reality on ground was a far cry from the promised palliatives made by the government; stating that only a small proportion of the population attested to receiving any support. Adedayo, Sennuga, & Sennuga [26] wrote that people read on pages of newspaper and social media of distribution of billions of naira to Nigerians without same getting to the targeted population resulting to hunger and frustration. Also pointing out criticisms against the palliatives, Eranga [16] noted that the exercise was politicised rather than

been sincerely deployed especially as there were no laid down parameters for determining the most vulnerable households, thereby making it possible for party faithfuls to turn themselves to be vulnerable households.

On a bright note, Kalu [25] observed that despite the socioeconomic differences seen across Nigerian communities, there was a sense of togetherness generally in the course of COVID-19 crisis and specifically with or without palliatives support.

CONCLUSION

The overall intention of the study was to examine peasantry and COVID-19 Palliatives in Nigeria. The specific objective of the study was to explore the factors that made COVID-19 a threat to peasantry in Nigeria. The study also sought to critically consider the benefits of COVID-19 palliatives to peasantry in Nigeria. The study adopted Marxian political economy approach as its theoretical framework. The key thrust of the Marxian theory suggested that the state was an instrument of exploitation and class dominance. The study essentially adopted qualitative approach. Critical method was also employed. The results from the study indicated that the gap in infrastructure delivery especially healthcare facilities stood out to worsen COVID-19 crisis situation among the peasantries in Nigeria. The results also revealed that the political elites viewed COVID-19 palliative as opportunity to help themselves rather than given needed support to the peasants.

The study concluded that COVID-19 palliatives tended to develop the pockets of the political elites at the expense of the peasantry who were the most vulnerable to the crisis. To ensure that the situation do not worsen for both the privileged and the less-privileged households the political elites in Nigeria need to focus on the well-being of the citizens.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the findings, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- 1) Political leaders should provide specific missing infrastructure especially health delivery that can stand the test of time and by so doing repair trust between the people and the government.
- 2) Peasantry friendly locally acceptable palliatives should be considered in order to avoid hunger, malnutrition, poverty and inequality as well as to localise food production system, promote self-sufficient and self-reliant economy.
- 3) The peasants should adopt a survival mindset and develop interest in backyard gardening to

serve as additional nutrients to meet their daily household dietary needs.

- 4) The political elites should bring foresight thinking into bear for post COVID-19 recovery system that promotes resilience.
- 5) Political leaders should increase consultation and aim at genuinely protecting its citizens and provide them with the necessary commodities or funds as palliatives without compromising the exercise.

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