

Pandemic Preparedness - The Political Economy (Nigeria Case Study on COVID-19)

Wambebe Nathaniel Mopa¹, Xiaoli Duan^{1,*}, Irekpitan Okukpon²

¹School of Energy and Environmental Engineering, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China

²Directorate of Continuing Legal Education, Consultancy & Regional Economic Integration Law, Nigeria Institute of Advance Legal Studies, Lagos, Nigeria

Email address:

jasmine@ustb.edu.cn (Xiaoli Duan)

*Corresponding author

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Abstract: In December 2019, the world was introduced to a previously unknown virus known as ‘Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). This disease metamorphosed into a pandemic of epic proportions which left the international community in a quandary as to the most effective measures to curtail its spread and reduce the effects on human health. With majority of developing countries putting in place state-of-the-art health care facilities to manage the pandemic and prevent deaths, developing countries in Africa lacking state-of-the-art health facilities to curb the spread of the pandemic and its management with country like Nigeria appearing to be ill-prepared to tackle the pandemic. Nigeria, with a population of over 200 million people, through the efforts of State Governments, has put in place various measures and facilities to tackle the pandemic and prevent a human development crisis. Unfortunately, prior to this pandemic, Nigeria has had a history of uncoordinated data collection and analysis for evidence-based decision making. However, the effectiveness of these measures and the effect of the pandemic on the socio-political economy of Nigeria leaves much to be desired. This paper examines the reality of Nigeria’s efforts in curbing COVID-19, focusing on the examples of Lagos and Kaduna States. It highlights the effects of the pandemic on Nigeria’s socio-political economy and proffers solutions towards ensuring Nigeria’s continued preparedness and reductions in infected persons as a result of the virus.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Pandemic Preparedness, Political Economy, Nigeria

1. Background

In December 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases from an unknown virus surfaced in Wuhan, China. Based on initial laboratory findings, the disease named Coronavirus disease [1] (otherwise known as ‘COVID-19) was described as a highly infectious disease. Over the course of January to May 2020, this disease has become a global pandemic which has spread to over 177 countries and territories. As of June 4th 2020, the death toll worldwide has risen to 387, 155 deaths with the number of confirmed cases worldwide being 6, 535, 354 (Six Million, Five Hundred and Thirty-Five Thousand, Three Hundred and Fifty-Four) [2]. This pandemic is more than a global health emergency – it is a systemic human development crisis which has already affected the economic

and social dimensions of development in unprecedented ways [3]. For a developing country like Nigeria, the pandemic has reached exponential heights with 11, 516 confirmed cases by 5th June 2020 [4]. With most developing countries in Africa lacking state-of-the-art health facilities to curb the spread of the pandemic and its management, the question that arises is: how prepared is Nigeria to tackle this pandemic. Whilst arguing that preparedness of a country must be considered in line with its potential vulnerability to the eventual effects of the pandemic, this paper also analyses the effects of the pandemic on the socio-economic and political economy of Nigeria over the past 5 months.

2. Nigeria's Preparedness and Efforts in Curbing the COVID-19 Responses

The Africa Center for Disease Control (Africa CDC) has been at the frontline of leading the continent's response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The Africa CDC has been building nations' capacities for preparedness and response to the disease, including prompt case identification, diagnosis and use of smart approaches to educate and sensitise the continent about the infection. Similarly, the efforts of the African WHO Regional office are quite commendable. The office has consistently provided updated information about the evolving disease and has provided diagnostic materials to member countries, with the aim of halting or at best limiting the spread of the infection across Africa. To further strengthen countries' preparedness there has been ongoing sensitisation of communities, training of healthcare workers and strengthening of surveillance mechanisms in communities [5].

Nigeria is the largest population in Africa. In April 2020, various COVID-19 cases had been registered in twelve states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, with Lagos and FCT reporting the highest number of cases [6]. These monitoring mechanisms have been made possible by the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Nigeria's leading national public health institute with a mandate to lead the preparedness, detection and response to infectious disease outbreak and public health emergencies [7].

Since January 2020, the NCDC has published various Guidelines and Protocols ranging from Frequently Asked Questions to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Recommendations for Management of COVID-19 to COVID-19 Prevention Posters, Travel Advisory, adoption of COVID-19 Health Protection Regulations 2021, etc. The NCDC website also provides for a Provisional Quarantine Protocol for Travellers arriving in Nigeria effective from 10th January 2021 with same Protocol applicable for Travellers arriving Nigeria from the United Kingdom and South Africa. Despite these publications and the adoption of a National COVID-19 Multi-Sectoral Pandemic Response Plan by the Federal Government, the pandemic has increased exponentially over the course of the last one year with Lagos bearing the highest number of confirmed cases at 57, 398 persons; 56, 964 persons discharged, and 426 persons dead [8]. Kano State and the FCT, Abuja project much lower numbers across board but the confirmed cases of over 162, 000 persons nationwide warrants a deeper understanding of the efforts being made by Federal and State Governments in tackling the pandemic.

The immediate action taken by the Lagos State and Kaduna State Governors provide an insight into Nigeria's preparedness to tackle the pandemic. For example, the Lagos State Governor, Babajide Sanwoolu implemented and imposed an order of social distancing by ordering the closure of primary and secondary schools in State, and reducing the number of individuals at different gatherings including places of worships [9] (mosques and churches) in the State in March

2020. It also published a Lagos State Infectious Diseases (Emergency Prevention) Regulations 2020 which contain provisions relating to these restrictions [10], restrictions on trade and commercial activities, punishment for violators and code of behaviour for specified parties. In addition, the Lagos State Government also set up over COVID-19 test centres located in the 20 local government areas of Lagos State [11], with a directive that providers of essential services such as fueling stations, supermarkets, banks, hospitals, etc. ensure the provision of handwashing facilities and hand sanitizers for the public who may want to use their facilities. This directive appears to be strictly adhered to in all public and private spaces throughout all the States in Nigeria. In Kaduna State, the Governor imposed a lockdown starting on 25 March 2020, preventing persons from entering the state from Lagos or FCT. The State government provided food and other necessities to deliver to the poorest in society as the lockdown affected losses in income for indigenes throughout the State. In addition to these State measures and other incentives, the Federal Government imposed a ban on inter-state passenger travel and the closure of all public places such as schools, bars, cinemas, churches, etc. since March 2020.

Despite these apparent preparedness measures and social media awareness by State and Federal Governments, the pandemic continues to spread. Criticisms of the NCDC have been rife particularly with regards to the inaccuracy of data on COVID-19 infections, deaths and hospitalized persons. Unfortunately, prior to this pandemic, Nigeria has had a history of uncoordinated data collection and analysis for evidence-based decision making. For example, the time lapse between sample collection and test results received for suspected cases sometimes exceeds the approximately two-week recovery period for mild cases of the disease, instead of the 48 hours benchmark [12]. Additionally, shortages of materials (reagents) were provided as a reason for delays in monitoring the spread and intensity of the disease in Nigeria.

3. The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Nigeria's Social and Political Economy

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the global economy in two ways. Firstly, the spread of the virus encouraged social distancing which led to the shutdown of financial markets, corporate offices, businesses and events. Secondly, the rate at which the virus was spreading, and the heightened uncertainty about how bad the situation could get, led to flight to safety in consumption and investment among consumers and investors [13]. There was a general consensus among top economists that the coronavirus pandemic would plunge the world into a global recession [14]. Top IMF economists such as Gita Gopinath and Kristalina Georgieva stated that the COVID-19 pandemic would trigger a global recession [15].

In financial markets, global stock markets erased about US\$6 trillion in wealth in one week from 24th to 28th of February. The travel restrictions imposed on the movement of people worldwide led to massive losses for businesses in the events industry, aviation industry, entertainment industry, hospitality industry and the sports industry. The combined loss globally was estimated to be over \$4 trillion. Several governments in developed countries, such as the U.S. and U.K., responded by offering fiscal stimulus package including social welfare payments to citizens while the monetary authorities offered loan relief to help businesses during the pandemic [13].

In Nigeria, the petroleum industry was greatly affected with an unexpected drop in crude oil prices. Oil servicing companies and oil and gas firms suffered great losses as a result of this which led to economic downturns and job losses within the first 5 months in 2020. Similarly, the aviation sector in Nigeria was affected with local and international flight cancellations. The pharmaceutical industry was also affected as most of the active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) used in Nigeria are imported from China. The education sector – primary, secondary and tertiary – have also suffered economic losses as a result of the shutdown of institutions, with a gradual navigation to online learning. Politically, there appears to be huge gap in trust and accountability between citizens and the Federal Government in Nigeria. The Federal Government attempted to build on past benefit programmes by providing cash and distributing food to vulnerable households, but these efforts have been hampered by poor communication, corruption, inefficiencies and a lack of transparency [16]. Additionally, the imposed lockdown by government has fuelled tensions across the country due to closure of mosques in Northern Nigeria. For example, a police station was burned down in Katsina state in response to the closure of mosques in the State [17]. Consequently, it appears that the ruling political class has not responded effectively to the pandemic and has to contend with building trust with its citizen having been criticised for being an inconsiderate and incommunicative government.

4. Conclusion: Solutions for Effective Pandemic Preparedness in Nigeria

This study provided a general overview of the level of preparedness of the Nigerian government towards the COVID-19 pandemic, using two key States in Nigeria – Lagos and Kaduna - as the basis for determination. The study reveals that Nigeria, like other developing and developed countries around the world has put in place various lockdown measures and adopted legislation to curtail movement and further curb the spread of the virus. The study further reveals that these measures are ineffective and hampered by a lack of political will on the part of the government, corruption, lack of transparency and accountability by the government in attempting to stem the pandemic.

Consequently, the study finds that Nigeria's efforts since its first report of the COVID-19 infection in an Italian Citizen on February 27, 2020 have been commendable but reflect more effective preparedness on the part of State Governments rather than the Federal Government. Besides from the proactiveness of the NCDC, the Federal Government's lack of preparedness is largely attributed to the poor state of its primary health care system and facilities, inadequate monthly remuneration of medical personnel, lack of budgeting for PPEs and other medical appurtenances, and other issues affecting the medical industry in Nigeria.

Thus, the following solutions are proffered to assist Nigeria's continued preparedness in handling the pandemic, and recommendations towards boosting Nigeria's socio-political economy post-pandemic:

1. Urgent review of 2020 budget to reflect current realities such as revenue and implement broader budget reforms which include the health sector. This implies that frivolous spending on non-capital projects by the government should be reduced and monies geared towards the health and agricultural sector, alternatives to Nigeria's oil and gas sector which used to provides the greatest revenue for Nigeria and has now been affected by the pandemic.
2. Immediate preparation of a post-COVID-19 recovery strategy which addresses and considers ways for rapid economic growth and overall human development.
3. Immediate reform of public health care facilities around Nigeria, and populating them with state-of-the-art medical equipment to tackle and properly manage infected persons.
4. Investing in mobile sample collection vehicles and distributing them in hundreds throughout the states of the Federation. These will facilitate testing of potentially affected patients and ensure accuracy of COVID-19 data in Nigeria to enable the development of current and future action plans.
5. Reduce time delays between testing of possibly infected patients and diagnosis to ensure proper containment of the spread of COVID-19.
6. Building of more isolation centres particularly in the Northern parts of Nigeria where water, sanitation and hygiene management is a recurring issue.
7. Collaboration with other public health institutes within Africa to facilitate research and development on COVID-19, to ensure Nigeria is adhering to global best practices on the pandemic.
8. Regional cooperation of all health institutions within Africa and implementing strict policies at various ports of entry will help to prevent further outbreaks of infections and deaths in the region.
9. Increased awareness about the pandemic on print, electronic and social media throughout the country, especially discussions around social distancing, stay-at-home strategies and hygiene to prevent further spread of the infection.

10. Publication of public funds spent on government palliatives to Nigerian citizens to promote transparency and confidence in government, and as such, prevent political unrests throughout the country.

Nigeria's systemic response to the COVID-19 pandemic stems from its previous successful strides in tackling previous epidemics such as Ebola, Polio, Lassa Fever and SARS. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity for Nigeria to embark on immediate reform of its health care sector, and implementation of the recommendations proffered above. Accordingly, the country's preparedness must be consistently interrogated until a globally reliable, authentic vaccine is adopted to prevent further deaths from the pandemic.

Availability of Data and Material

Material were source online and available from news press releases.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions

Author Wambebe Nathaniel Mopa put together the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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