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The Impact of Covid-19 on Economic Conditions of the Poor in Rural Communities in Enugu State, Nigeria

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Abstract:

Since the outbreak of the deadly and contagious corona virus pandemic in December, 2019, Nigerians and citizens all over the world have continued to grapple with the negative outcomes associated with the virus. In Nigeria, the government's slow response to the needs of the people and many more issues gave rise to the present study and the study sought to assess the economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The study followed a Qualitative research Model and adopted an explorative research design, interviews were also conducted on petty traders, food vendors, road side hawkers, transporters, small and medium scale businesses, and some other person who were affected by the lockdown policy. Findings from the study revealed that citizens from the lower economic status and rural dwellers were badly affected by the stay-at-home policy as their only means of livelihood were cut short abruptly. It was recommended that government should provide palliative to the poor with all the basic necessities of life, be responsible to citizens and control the cost of food in the market and finally, government should be transparent, responsive and shun corruption. All these will go a long way in cushioning the effects of the pandemic.

Keywords: Rural, poor, agriculture, covid19, pandemic, economy

1. Introduction

The rural communities in Nigeria are largely traditional and bunged to modern facilities and utilities, in most cases they are not economically vibrant in terms of production and distribution of goods and services. According to the CBN (2019) the resources in the rural areas are largely untapped and provide a mere fraction of National revenue in the country. And in harmony to the National Geographic (2020) a rural area is defined as an open swath of land that has few homes or other buildings, with a few populations and providing a good environment for wildlife. The World Bank (2021) argues that Agriculture is the primary industry of a rural life because most people live or work on farms or ranches and reside in Hamlets, villages, towns, and other small settlements that are in or surrounded by rural areas. In Enugu Nigeria, good examples of rural areas include Enugu-Ezike, Uzouwani, Opi-Agu, etc. Populations within these localities are often characterized as poor. They cannot afford basic services and are largely excluded from the following: medical healthcare services, robust transportations services, financial or banking services, industrialization and a number of other services that enhances the quality of life.

Life in the rural area is largely affected by poverty, according to the findings of Campos, Villani, Davis and Takagi (2018), the rural poor are different from the urban poor and the non-poor. Their incomes depend greatly on agricultural activities, either from work on their farms, or agricultural wage employment. It is this reliance on agriculture that makes the rural extreme poor highly vulnerable to climatic shocks and weather events. In addition, according to The US Department of Agriculture (2019) a rural concentrated poverty contributes to poor housing and health conditions, higher crime and school dropout rates, and employment dislocations. As a result, economic conditions in very poor areas can create limited opportunities for poor residents that become self-perpetuating.

The occurrence of the covid-19 pandemic could have made life more difficult for rural dwellers and would as well deepen the problem of poverty. The economic impact of the COVID-19 outbreak possess a consequence that is well observed in the both urban and rural settlements. Hence, the African Development Bank (2020) posits that Nigeria's economy entered a recession in 2020, reversing three years of recovery, due to fall in crude oil prices on account of falling global demand. Overall real GDP is estimated by the Bank to have shrunk by 3% in 2020. Inflation rose to 12.8% in 2020 from 11.4% in 2019, fueled by higher food prices due to constraints on domestic supplies and the pass-through effects of an exchange rate premium that widened to about 24%. According to Aalok, Sunil, Sachin and Yiğit (2020) it was noted that

the COVID-19 pandemic has broken the most of transportation links and distribution mechanisms between suppliers, production facilities and customers. Africa faces economic crisis, the continent had already experienced a slowdown in growth and poverty reduction overall, although with large differences between countries. The current crisis could erase years of development gains (OECD, 2020).

The quick spread of the COVID-19 viral infection is alarming and requires a thorough check on the virus in search for a cure. The process of finding a solution is slow because the animal origin for the COVID-19 outbreak have not been confirmed yet (WHO, 2020), this condition provokes a thought that the recent wave of the virus was man-made. This is also responsible for the various conspiracy theories largely supported by Trumps administration (the Guardian, 2020).

2. Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research model; thus, it applies a non-numeric and a non-statistical approach towards data collection and analyses. Data were sourced from secondary sources of data collection. The Explorative research design was used for the study because the study intends assessing the economic effects of COVID-19 in rural areas of Nigeria. The Content was broken down to the appropriate subheadings.

3. Discussion

The study was well deliberated under the following headlines,

- Spread of the Virus to rural areas
- Awareness of the COVID-19 Virus among rural settlers
- Effects on the rural Economy

3.1. Spread of the Virus to Rural Areas

The COVID-19 outbreak smouldered for some time, eventually becoming visible as chains of transmission multiplied, spilled into capital cities through airports, and became so numerous they could no longer be traced in rural areas (WHO, 2020). Near-term Disease control actions can help rural communities as they manage the pandemic on three fronts which includes the following:

- Treating serious COVID-19 cases
- Curbing further spread of the virus and
- Addressing mental health and social needs.

Among the three mentioned above, the present discuss is concerned with the 'spread of the Covid-19 infection,' which is transmitted through droplets during close unprotected contact between an infected person to an uninfected person. Human to human transmission occur mostly amongst family members who are closely related. From the study conducted in some provinces in Guangdong and Sichuan provinces revealed that 78% - 85% transmission occurs within the family. (WHO/China Joint Mission Report, 2020).

The wide spread of the virus to other parts of the world, in their respective country capital as well as its rural areas becomes a serious threat to mankind. In a study carried out by Huang, Jackson, Derakhshan, Lee, Pham and Jackson et al. (2021) there are five early clusters of cases, with two clusters of high cases in largely rural counties. They added that it is possible that the index cases were randomly transmitted in the rural areas at the early stage when the transmission was unchecked. As shown in their analysis, even though total fatalities in rural areas were lower than in urban areas, the normalized mortality rates in rural areas were indeed higher than in urban areas. The USA Facts (2019) reveals that at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, cases and deaths were concentrated in large urban centers. However, as the pandemic progressed, rural communities began to bear a higher burden from the virus, they further report that the death rates have risen in rural communities since March 2020 (Ahmad, 2020). National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (2020) still asserts that the COVID-19 surveillance data might be biased due to the limited testing locations in rural areas which is also applicable in the rural areas of the Enugu locality as at 2020 COVID-19 hit periods.

3.2. Awareness of the Covid-19 Virus among Rural Areas

To disseminate validated COVID-19 information, Health information campaigns play an important role in raising public awareness and encouraging preventive and health-promoting behavior. Examples include information provided via text messages by service providers, discussing various precautions over the phone could significantly improve rural people's awareness and induce compliance with COVID-19 public health guidelines (Siddique, Rahman, Pakrashi, Islam and Ahmed, 2020). According to Malengue (2021) the activity of creating rural awareness is of paramount importance, because it is vulnerable people that contract the disease due to lack of information and the basic means of biosecurity.

The study shows that the current COVID-19 situation created awareness among females and adults aged between 18 to 47 years in rural and gender biased areas. Another study conducted by Deblina et al., (2020) in India revealed that respondents who had a median level of knowledge about the coronavirus were eager to follow central government instructions. Although Ezeah, Ogechi, Ohia and Celestine (2020) states that despite communicating the COVID-19 information between urban and rural areas, it is often realized that rural communities are particularly at risk because of their low socio-economic status and high illiteracy level.

Awareness of the disastrous and damaging effect of this contagious virus will propel individuals, groups, government and bodies to take concrete steps to control the pandemic. In this regard, some preventive measures have been spelt out by WHO and government of individual countries to be observed and adhered to as a measure to curb the spread of the virus (WHO, 2021). These measures include, washing of hands for about 20 minutes, using of hand

sanitizers, wearing of face masks, self-isolating and quarantine, cough or sneezing into disposable tissue paper, maintaining social distancing and more importantly staying at home. Social distancing refers to an effort targeted at decreasing or interrupting an infectious disease within a population by minimizing physical contact between potentially infected individuals and healthy individuals, or between population group with high rate of transmission and population group with no or low level of transmission (ECDC Report, 2020).

The dissemination of this information has been carried out widely by the media, cooperate organizations, NGOs (local and international) civil society organizations, educational bodies and well-meaning individuals to our local communities, educating the people about the dangers of corona virus.

3.3. Effects on the Rural Economy

Naturally life becomes difficult in rural areas when the society is hardly hit with diseases or a flu (WHO, 2015). The covid-19 pandemic and its attendant consequences have not left the Nigerian economy blossoming. The pandemic has put a severe pressure on the economy of the country. Nigeria is still grappling to recover from the economic recession she suffered in 2016 as a result of oil price crash and insufficient foreign exchange earnings, only to be faced with a heavier burden of a pandemic which affected oil price in the global market. According to The Conversation (2018) Nigeria rely heavily on oil export and presently, there is a decline in oil demand which has also resulted in fall on oil price. The consequences of these have adverse effect on the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The Nigeria's 2020 budgets indicates that the GDP is expected to grow to the rate of 2.93 percent and inflation rate at 10.8 percent but this projection is not realizable and cannot be reached as a result of the fall in oil price since the economy solely depends on oil (WE Forum, 2015).

The impact of this has been felt by everyone even those in government MDAs. According to Liu (2020) Many workers' salaries were cut down; some were owed for quite a number/couple of months during the lockdown, pensioners' salaries and gratuities were not paid too, private companies, shops, banks, and many businesses were shut down thereby bringing untold hardship on the populace. Even, some state governments are yet to implement the new national minimum wage of ₦30, 000 to workers.

Based on the findings of Obiakor (2020). Many people in Nigeria are poor and a sizable number of them depend on daily income from sales of articles, such as sachet water, groundnuts, kola nuts, gala, and biscuits. Others work as transporters, food vendors, unskilled labourers, artisans and all sorts of menial jobs for livelihood (CSEA, 2020). The hustling and bustling in the ever-busy city markets have pipe down low as a result of the pandemic and lockdown imposed on the people and the country at large (Busari and Salaudeen, 2020). The dwindling economy has not left anyone with full money in the pocket. Prices of commodity in the market are skyrocketing on daily basis; many people are faced with hunger and uncertainty for tomorrow.

The rural dwellers are largely farmers, and the effect of the pandemic on farmers is devastating. The policy of the lockdown and social distancing frustrates the agricultural productive activity. According to Puglia, (2020) agriculture requires people, whether it's harvesting vegetables, de-tasseling corn, or pruning vines, people are vital in many aspects of farming. Harvesting fruit and vegetables requires large teams of people, often working in close proximity, to quickly pick produce just in time for it to be delivered at peak flavor and freshness (*ibid*). It is commonly thought that most farm workers come from very poor economic backgrounds and rely on daily wages for their livelihoods, they have families to look after, but the lockdown has worsened their situation even more.

Global travel restrictions and isolation orders have become one of the main challenges facing farmers. The use of Mechanization could only be seasonal. For products such as for fruit and vegetables, travel restrictions could have a potentially devastating impact because they are perishable goods. The result is substantial food and financial losses. (US Department of Agriculture, 2021; Papas, 2020).

4. Conclusion

The National Geographic (2020) explains a rural area is as an open swath of land that has few homes or other buildings, with a few populations and providing a good environment for wildlife. The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic could have made life more difficult for rural dwellers and would as well deepen the problem of poverty. The current crisis could erase years of development gains (OECD, 2020). At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, cases and deaths were concentrated in large urban centers. However, as the pandemic progressed, rural communities began to bear a higher burden from the virus, they further report that the death rates have risen in rural communities. The rural communities are particularly at risk because of their low socio-economic status and high illiteracy level.

Based on the findings of Obiakor (2020) many people in Nigeria are poor and a sizable number of them depend on daily income from sales of articles and agricultural products such as sachet water, groundnuts, kola nuts, gala, and biscuits and their trade and survival would be largely affected by the lockdown rules implemented during the covid-19 period, a lot of shops and markets were locked up, and the traders could find it difficult to survive if they don't engage into sales. In much cases, their employees would be laid off. In sum, the effect of COVID-19 on the economy is actually devastating especially to the local rural dwellers whose main occupation is tied to agriculture and petty trading.

5. Recommendation

The study was very resourceful in providing insights to the reality of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the economic lives of the individuals; however, it is appropriate that the following suggestion is made:

- It is appropriate that the government be honest to individuals on the origin of the virus, since they claim is the evolution of an existing virus, especially in a situation when the theory of evolution from the scientific perspective is actually unproven. Neither did the case study specifically justify such claims.
- Secondly, the government could approach the scenario from a holistic perspective, the government in many underdeveloped countries primarily ensured that the lockdown policy and the isolation policy was well implemented without considering other socio-economic needs of the people.
- The government should develop a rapid response mechanism to the problems of outbreaks such as the COVID-19 pandemic; hence the government should work with stakeholders from other sectors of the economy to make life better.
- The government should improve its research institutes to develop existing scientific capacity to efficiently manage such health emergency calls such as viral or disease outbreaks.
- The government should provide palliative to the poor with all the basic necessities of life, be responsible to citizens and control the cost of food in the market and finally, government should be transparent, responsive and shun corruption. All these will go a long way in cushioning the effects of the pandemic on rural areas.

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