



## Rethinking Rural Development in Nigeria: Lessons from COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

*Covid-19 pandemic remains one of the most divisive and intriguing public health challenges of the 21st century. Its ravaging effects was/is felt in every nation of the world. Efforts at containing and mitigating the spread of the virus took virtually everyone by surprise given the drastic nature of some of the measures which appeared strange to a people used to freedom. The measures ranged from total or partial lockdown on movements of persons and commodities across cities and nations, social/physical distancing, regular hand-washing, use of hand sanitizers, self-quarantine among others. While the success associated with these measures is the subject of debate, the pandemic itself exposed the state of health care services across the World. In Nigeria as in some other developing countries the impact of infrastructures deficits, poverty, ignorance, skewed quality and quantity of health services between rural and urban areas would have suggested massive deaths of unimaginable proportions in rural areas. This was however not the case. This paper assessed the resilience of rural areas in Nigeria against the impact of Covid-19. This paper utilizes the desk research to explain what may have accounted for the good standing of rural areas in Nigeria against Covid -19 regardless of the depth of poverty, low literacy, infrastructural deficits and poor economic status of most rural dwellers. Moreover, due to the economic drawback as a result of the impact of the Covid-19, there is need for a new approach that can make for rural resilience and the sustenance of more rural population, thereby reducing rural-urban migration. This paper holds that such new planning strategy should uphold self-reliant neighbourhoods with sufficient markets, hospitals, education facilities, among others. The study further recommends measures towards ameliorating the hardship on rural population by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.*

**Key words:** Covid-19, Infrastructure deficit, Resilience, Rural Area.

### Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic have had ravaging effects in every nation of the world. Efforts at containing and mitigating the spread of the virus by such measures as total or partial lockdown on movements of persons, social distancing, regular hand-washing, use of hand sanitizers, self-quarantine, among others have achieved varying degrees of success. The degree of success against Covid-19 in terms of prevention and containment hinged to a large extent on the population compliance, geography, social and economic factors, among others. Most Countries have reported the number of cases of infected persons, number of deaths resulting from infection, as well as the losses incurred due to disruption at work and isolation.



While death toll arising from Covid -19 appear to be higher in western developed nations, most developing Countries have equally suffered losses.

According to Nigeria's centre for disease control (CDC) as at 12th January, 2023 266,463 cases had been confirmed, 259,850 cases were discharged and 3,155 deaths had been recorded in 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory related to Covid-19. infections. Lagos State had the highest reported deaths 771.

Rural areas are reputed to have infrastructure deficit, including health infrastructure, and services, among others. Okhankhuele and Opafunso (2013) and Akhimien, Adamolekun, and Isiwele (2018)) note that several approaches to narrow the gap between rural and urban areas in terms of development have only achieved little success in Nigeria. The plight of rural areas in Nigeria have barely changed for good in spite of the number of rural development programmes introduced at different intervals by successive governments. These efforts have often consumed enormous material and financial resources with barely noticeable or no impact in the rural areas. As it were, most rural centred programmes in Nigeria usually die with the administration that commenced it with no continuity. Therefore, the impact of Covid-19 was expected to be higher in such poorly served locations.

The plight of rural dwellers were further dealt a blow with movement restrictions which made them unable to go to their farms, or unable to transport agricultural produce to cities, while those permitted to make such journey did so at a higher cost with possibility of Covid-19 virus infection.

Covid-19 pandemic which literally caught the World unprepared is indicative of the incompleteness of human knowledge, the limitation of science to predict with total accuracy what would happen next. It also points to the fact that new unforeseeable crises could arise, as the mixture of environmental degradation, rising inequalities in social groups and intense economic interrelationships have made the global environment more susceptible, thus highlighting the necessity to address societal resilience from all angle (Giovannini et al., 2020, De Luca et al, 2020). Thus, this paper argues that the Covid-19 pandemic may as well be the tonic needed for all stakeholders in development to work towards making rural communities self-reliant and not appendages of urban areas.

Rural areas are the chief custodians of societal culture, traditions, language, arts, songs, folklore nutritional systems and values (De Luca, Tondelli and Åberg 2020). However, most rural settlements are so deep in poverty as it is said poverty now assumes a rural face. In the face of these, rural areas in Nigeria are increasingly faced with demographic challenges



of mass outmigration of young persons, aging, economic depression, disconnectedness with the rest of the World as well as, decreased provision of service and accessibility. These forces help to entrench depression and degradation in rural abodes making the inhabitants total dependants on handouts as against being engaged in its age long agricultural practices. Given their prime of place it behoves on us to double our efforts towards rural development. Rural development entails undertaking enduring changes in the organization of the rural area in a way that output and productivity are improved; the machinery and procedures of production are thoroughly transformed with better standard of living (Akhimien et al, 2018). Akhimien et al (2018), noted that the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA, 1972) defined rural development as “the outcome of a series of qualitative and quantitative changes occurring among rural population”.

Rural development has to do with the self-reliant enhancement of rural areas and denotes a broad centred re-organization and mobilization of the rural population in order to improve their capability to effectively cope with the daily obligation for living and with the changes resulting from this (Mabogunje, 1981, Enyi, 2014). Rural development is a multi-facet process covering areas like health, commerce and industry, education, agriculture, social life, rural infrastructures, economic and political factors, among others, and their interaction with the national economy (Enyi, 2014).

This post-colonial perspective is a deviation from the former colonial organization whereby development energies in every facet were focused in the urban areas to the disregard of rural environments (Akhimien et al, 2018). Therefore, schemes like road construction, bridges, railway lines, air ports, ports, schools and marketing boards, etc., were all targeted at exposing the rural hinterland for the ease of raw materials exploitation (Akhimien et al, 2018). X-raying the Nigerian National Development plans from 1975-1985 and other rural development schemes such as Green Revolution, Agricultural Development Projects, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), River Basin Development Authorities, and many others have highlighted the need to address the challenge of rural under-development (Akhimien et al, 2018). Government on its side, have realized the need to accommodate the abandoned rural areas in the quest for national development (Akhimien et al, 2018).

### **Covid-19 Pandemic and the Imperative for Rural Development**

The Covid-19 virus was first observed in December 31st, 2019, where 27 cases of the pneumonia-like health condition of unknown origin were reported at Wuhan City in Hubei province in China (Lu, et al, 2020 in Sohrabia, et al. 2020). The World Health Organisation declared the Chinese COVID-19 outbreak a Public Health Emergency of Universal Concern on 30th January 2020 (Sohrabia, et al 2020). The spread of COVID-19 pandemic has altered the potency of many of the great cities of the globe such as Wuhan, Madrid,



Milan, New York City, and others (Sharif, 2020). COVID-19 virus outbreak is a global pandemic that entails global reactions (Muggah, 2020). However, the World health organization (WHO) advised countries to localize the measures outlined by WHO so as help mitigate the spread of the virus. Social distancing, (maintaining a minimum of 3 feet away from the closest person while sneezing, coughing, and speaking) is one of the essential measures aimed at preventing the spread of the virus (Islam and Golam, 2020), and to avoid inhaling infected droplet. Others include avoiding the touching of one's nose, mouth, and eyes, covering one's nose and mouth with a bent elbow or tissue while coughing or sneezing to protect others around, self-isolation for those possibly exposed to Covid-19 infection, among others (Islam and Golam, 2020). Many countries at the thick of the pandemic enforced movement restriction, border closure in some cases, changes in the pattern of public and private transportation, among others. Some developed countries also put up some measures to help people cope better in the face of global pandemic. The Nigerian government showed a level of commitment with the enforcement of different phases of lockdown in the country. Such efforts to contain pandemic through lockdowns and market closures took a heavy social and economic toll on many poor and vulnerable households with little or no support. As it were, the restriction of economic and social activity meant that Covid-19 became yet another systemic human development crisis in rural areas where many inhabitants depend on daily subsistence livelihoods, and these are persons that government palliatives hardly gets to.

### **Urban Biased Discourse**

Larger percentage of public discourse is centering on urban densely occupied settlements, their movement concerns and the future of public spaces in cities. Few scholars concentrate on the challenges and prospects for rural areas in the face of Covid-19 crisis as well as their effects (De Luca et al, 2020). Earlier studies (Setti et al., 2020; Xiao et al, 2020), exposed that the Covid-19 pandemic has a quicker transmission and harder impact on death rate in densely populated areas. Nevertheless, there are several vital factors that influence the vulnerability of an area to the disease, of which density is most probable just one of them. Thus, it has been noted that all over the world, Covid-19 has taken root and intensely impacted on areas with varied climatic, geographic and demographic features (De Luca et al, 2020).

There are reported cases of Covid-19 and its attendant deaths in the hinterlands of Brazil. The states that are mostly rural in nature like Amapá and Amazonas have high prevalence and death rates, and their health systems are crumbling (Floss, Franco, Malvezzi, Silva, Costa, Silva, Werreria and Duarte 2020). Although cities have been hard hit by the Covid-19 crisis, the current crisis threatens rural areas even more, revealing challenges aggravated



by little available incomes, inadequate accessible health services and higher isolation concerns (De Luca, Tondelli and Åberg 2020).

In contrast to the urban centred studies, several stakeholders are calling for a 'rural renaissance', where rural areas would undertake a pivotal part in advancing resilient and sustainable communities (De Luca et al, 2020). The shock from the Covid-19 pandemic is so great in length of time and intensity that it is solely difficult to approach it through absorptive capabilities or a merely system adaptation. Consequently, it should evolve into occasion for progress and forward leap through transformation and adaptation (Giovannini et al. 2020, cf. De Luca et al, 2020).

### **Why Was Covid-19 Not very Harsh as expected in rural areas?**

Rural communities relish on thousands of years of cooperation between humans, nature, and culture. They are used to simple and natural ways of living. It is doubtful if any lives in an air conditioned apartment nor hell bent on using cold refrigerated drinks in any rural area in Nigeria. Given the poor state of most households' economy, coupled with scanty health facilities most still rely on natural treatments for ailments. Beside, many rural dwellers often prone to malaria are routinely taking medications against low intensity flu like conditions that have been part of their daily health challenges that added to the resilient to Covid-19. Some authors point to the relatively young population in rural areas as the reason since the pandemic casualties were mostly among the elderly (Jakkie, Marius, Stellah, Kelly, Poee, Kouassi and Jonathan, 2020). Equally of concern was the issue of low testing among the population.

### **Novel Measures for Rural Development Planning**

Building sustainable, equitable and participatory rural communities will necessitate working on strengthening human resources, cultural and social capitals, through rural arts and heritage potentials recognition and enhancement for harnessing ability (De Luca et al, 2020). Development comprises the reorientation and restructuring of all social and entire economic system (Akhimien et al, 2018). Thus the following recommendations:

- **Harnessing of rural tourism potentials:** the values of the untampered rural natural and cultural capitals, affords good opportunity of safe and attractive tourist destination as well as for work (De Luca, et al, 2020). The decrease in tourists has offered respite to areas that accept more people, supporting their natural environmental recovery. Thus, effort at strengthening rural tourism should be fostered. Policies should be put in place to attract investor into rural tourism. This could be achieved by reducing rural tourism tax, improving rural security, among other measures.



- Rural communities need to be given a sense of belonging by provision of basic amenities like good and functional roads, educational facilities, social or low-cost housing, health care service. This will boost the health, educational capabilities of dwellers, among other gains. NGOs and government should focus on promoting skill acquisition and training for rural dwellers. Those in the rural areas should be provided with basic training centres where they can learn various skills to boost their economy and wellbeing.

### **Conclusion**

Covid-19 has created a human development crisis across the World but it has also opened opportunities to accelerate infrastructure investment and economic reform to boost both rural and urban areas to prepare better for future shocks either in the forms of health, environment or economic dimensions. The challenge is, have we heeded the warnings?

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