



# #payusviaBVN: Social Media, Lockdowns and Social Welfare in Nigeria

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Lockdowns have been applied worldwide as methods for reducing the spread of the COVID-19. Since declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, The World Health Organization (WHO) has through its daily press briefings and health campaigns stressed the need for governments to shut down schools, parks, places of worship and business locations to help stem community spread of the deadly virus (WHO, 2020).

Lockdowns have come at a great price. Livelihoods have been severely affected worldwide. Shortfalls in revenue due to lack of business, have led to job losses and salary cuts in many countries. In efforts to cushion the negative effects of lockdowns, governments of countries across North America, Europe and Asia have distributed short-term assistance to citizens in the form of stimulus cheques and food parcels. However, in countries across Africa, the reverse is the case. In Nigeria for example, issues of lockdown and distribution of social assistance have been a completely different reality.

**Lockdown - death sentence for Nigeria's poor**

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country with a current population of 200 million. The country is richly endowed with oil reserves, mineral and agricultural resources. The bulk of its revenue comes from oil exports with little attention given to other sectors of the economy. However, despite the country's vast resources, most Nigerians live below the global poverty line, surviving on less than \$1.90 a day (Omoniyi, 2017).

Mismanagement of the country's wealth by consecutive corrupt administrations have turned the once *Giant of Africa* to the *Poverty Capital of the World*. 94.5 million Nigerians live in abject poverty. Most educated Nigerians are unemployed. Others work daily jobs as laborers, artisans, or petty trade (Mailafia, 2019).

The first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was reported on February 27, 2020. The index case was described as an Italian construction worker who returned from Milan. Since February, the number of infections has escalated to over 4,600, with 150 deaths as of May 2020. In response to rising infections and deaths, the Nigerian government issued directives for total lockdowns in the three worst-hit states of Lagos, Ogun, and Abuja, the country's capital. Similarly, state governors also issued total or partial lockdowns in their respective regions based on prevailing circumstances.

The enforcement of lockdowns has had a biting effect on Nigerians. Some Nigerians have likened life under lockdown to a death sentence as they can no longer afford to buy food and pay for other daily essentials. In response, the Nigerian government announced a series of short-term measures or palliatives to minimize hardships caused by the lockdowns. These palliatives included a reduction in the price of petrol, extended

moratoriums for companies, and individuals and promise to provide monetary and food assistance to all citizens (Emejo, 2020).

### **Donors to the Rescue**

Nigeria has not been abandoned in the COVID-19 crisis. International organizations and the Nigerian private sector have been particularly generous. Nigeria has received huge sums in donations. The European Union gifted the country € 50 million. USD 21.4 million was received from the US government and €5.5 million from Germany as COVID-19 aid. Donations from Nigeria's private sector have exceeded USD 50 million. These donations were made with strict instructions to be used as monetary and food stimuli for Nigeria's poor and to help with infrastructure in the fight against COVID-19. The decision of donors was particularly apt as Nigeria had no functional social response systems to assist vulnerable citizens in a pandemic.

### **Polarizing Social Welfare**

While citizens waited in anticipation for their bank accounts to be credited with money from donors, the government announced that it was unable to reach all citizens due to a lack of a national database. Days later, the government declared that it was going to hand out money and food parcels to only 2 million Nigerians living in Northern states. The government described these Nigerians as the 'poorest of the poor'. Analysts criticized this decision as being unfair and discriminatory to other poor and vulnerable Nigerians living in regions in the middle belt, southwest, southeast, and south-south.

### **Responding with Social Media #payusviaBVN**

In response to the government's polarizing actions, Nigerians took to social media to express displeasure. The hashtag #payusviaBVN was created in March 2020 and began to trend in Nigerian Twitter and Facebook circles. The rationale behind the hashtag was to point the government's attention to the existence of Bank Verification Numbers (BVN) as a means of distributing monetary assistance. In 2014, The Central Bank of Nigeria collected personal data and bank records of Nigerians to create a database. This database was meant to keep records of all bank account holders and add layers of security to bank accounts against the actions of fraudsters.

Through #payusviaBVN, Nigerians have expressed dissatisfaction with the government's polarizing decisions. Analysis of 1000 tweets and retweets revealed a variety of critical commentary on Twitter. Some users have accused the Nigerian government of trying to play politics with money meant for the vulnerable poor. These users comment that northern states were particularly favored based on the ethnicity of the President Muhammadu Buhari, who is from Katsina state in Nigeria's northwest. Comments by this group of users are in line with a series of allegations of widespread tribalism and nepotism leveled against the Buhari led administration. Under Buhari, key government appointments and development projects have tended to favor the north (Ameh and Isenyo, 2020). Northern states form the majority base of the ruling All Progressives Congress party (APC).

Other tweets outline various donations from international organizations including financial analysis of how donations could have been divided among Nigeria's 200 million citizens <https://twitter.com/ibisogeorge/status/1250071627540443137>.

Another group of mostly visual tweets shows videos of Nigerians in Europe withdrawing stimulus money from cash machines

(<https://twitter.com/clementronix/status/1251139570860797954>)

Other tweets share images of stimulus cheques received in foreign countries. These groups of tweets could be understood as users' way of trying to shame the Buhari led administration in light of efforts by other governments to assist vulnerable residents in times of crisis. By sharing these images, these Nigerians try to communicate that they are better treated in foreign lands by foreign governments in contrast to fellow citizens back home.

### **Giving voice to Citizens**

Social media channels provide Nigerians tools and platforms for expressing critical commentary with little or no government control (Ephraim, Akter, and Gansinger 2017). With the spread of mobile phones, digital devices, and lowering internet costs, Nigerian youths are increasingly participating in both national and international conversations on social media platforms (Ephraim, 2013). This development is indicative of the destruction of state propaganda apparatuses, which were historically employed during crises to promote nonexistent government efforts.

The Nigerian government has severally registered its displeasure at the proliferation of social media criticism. It has labeled critical voices as disgruntled elements from the opposition party and critical commentary as hate speech and cyberbullying. The Nigerian government is actively seeking a hate speech law to censor voices on social

media. However, the government's efforts have met strong opposition from citizens and some lawmakers in the national parliament.



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