

HISTORICIZING THE POLITICS OF COVID-19 PALLIATIVES TOWARDS EFFECTIVE PEACE BUILDING IN NIGERIA: THE EBONYI STATE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

By the second week of March 2020, Nigeria came under the threat of covid-19 pandemic. Trammelled by the global lockdown on international borders, the need for interstates' border closure to curtail the widespread of the virus in the country became imperative. With the first index case recorded in Ogun state and subsequently in many other states, Federal government at one time or the other announced that state governments are to inaugurate covid-19 Task Force in order to ensure that there is safety to the lives of Nigerians. In doing that, Federal Government decided to give palliatives through the state governments to cushion the effects of the lockdown. Rather than sharing the palliatives, a dawn to dusk curfew in Ebonyi State was announced without necessarily providing any kind of economic assistance to the people. This created serious problems to the day-to-day economic activities of the people to the extent that corporate bodies, civil society and wealthy Nigerians began to make cash donations to governments in order to mitigate the hardship associated with the lockdown. This study therefore interrogates the measures adopted by state governments towards distributing the palliatives without flouting covid-19 safety measures in the state. Materials for this study were sourced from both primary and secondary sources while historical and analytical methodology were adopted. The paper concludes that Ebonyi state government's approach to the federal government palliatives was a deceptive peace mechanism that allowed people to continuously compiling their names while the lockdown had been relaxed.

Keywords: Historicizing, Politics, Covid-19 Palliatives, Peace building, Ebonyi State

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a worldwide pandemic of corona virus caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SAR-CoV-2). It was reported to have broken out from Wuhan Science Laboratory-China in 2019 and spread to

other parts of the world like wind fire. In Nigeria, the first index case was recorded in Ogun State on 27th February, 2020 and on 28th February, the Federal Government quickly responded by assuring the citizens of its readiness to strengthen surveillance at five International airports in the country in order to prevent the spread of the virus. Among the airports were Enugu, Lagos, Rivers, Kano and the FTC. On the same day, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control equally raised the morale of Nigerians by announcing that they had already set up corona virus group and was ready to activate its incident system should any case emerge in the country. Undoubtedly, Nigerians were by that announcement passionate that measures had been taken to stymie the spread of the virus and possibly provide palliatives to cushion the effects of the pandemic in case the country decided to go on lockdown. Unfortunately, it took the country another 11 days for the second case to be confirmed on March 9, 2020 through a contact of the Italian national. Since then, the number of index cases has grown astronomically with Lagos State being the epicenter of the pandemic in country.

However, with the number of cases on the rise, the governments' efforts to prevent the spread of the virus became intensified, and as Chibuike Alagboso and Bashar Abubakar wrote, since March 2020, borders have been shut, lockdowns imposed, interstate travel banned, and offices, clubs and services considered to be non-essential closed with public sectors affected to the extent that oil and gas industry, trade and manufacturing as well as other services were also affected. Thus, leading the Federal Government to revise the 2020 budget down by more than ₦17 billion.¹ Meanwhile, from the moment the first case was reported in Nigeria, the Nigerian government and its agencies quickly initiated several health, economic, security and social responses to contain the disease and its impact on the society. One of those several measures was the government-funded ₦500 billion COVID-19 crisis intervention fund. Others included setting up the Presidential Task Force to provide policy direction and activities for the various Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) responsible to fighting the pandemic and as well as expanding testing, training, protocols and surveillance through Ministry of Health, NCDC and Nigerian Security Agents. To fully implement this plan, the president of Nigeria Muhammadu Buhari first banned flights from countries with high rates ongoing transmission on March 18, 2020, and five days, later announced a total closure of the nation's airspace and land borders.²

Against that background however, the president further announced that a cash grant of ₦10 billion would be given to Lagos state as it has the country's highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, and a five billion naira special intervention fund to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, the agency responsible for supporting states in the COVID-19 response, coordinating surveillance of the disease and public health response nationwide. Most importantly, the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development was tasked with implementing the palliative measures across the country. Some of the measures adopted include disbursing of four months grants of ₦20,000 to the poorest households in 36 states of the federation as well as food items to states governments for onward distribution to the citizens.

As part of the COVID-19 protocols, the Ebonyi State Government queued into the Federal Government safety measures by announcing interstate boundary closure and advised its citizens to always sanitize their hands, wear facemask as well as adopt 25 meters physical distancing. On 26th April, 2020, the Ebonyi State Governor, Engr David Umahi on media broadcast announced that a 31-year-old man from Ukwau in Onicha Local Government Area of the state has tested positive for COVID-19. He said that:

'Today 26th of April 2020, unfortunately, I wish to announce that Ebonyi have recorded the first COVID-19 case index. The index case is a 31-year-old man from Ukwau, Onicha Local Government Area. He runs a hire purchase transport business with Sienna vehicle which he uses to carry food items to Ore in (Ondo) State. Usually after selling these food items he will use the vehicle to carry passengers back to the Southeast. The patient made two journeys this year, one on March 29 after which he returned to Ebonyi on April 1 and travelled again on April 12 to Ore.

While in Ore he could not get passengers to bring back to Southeast. And he had to wait for some time in Ore sleeping in motor parks and filling stations. And when he could not, he started making his way back to Ebonyi State. On his way he saw three Ebonyians that were speaking Ebonyi Language. He stopped, and they told him that they were going to Ebonyi and were stranded with no money. He called the parents and they agreed that he should bring them back and they would pay him when

they get back. That was on the 15 of April. They passed through many states sleeping in motor parks and filling stations on the way and only got to Ebonyi on April 20.

They passed through Ivo Local Government and made their way to Okposi in Ohaozara where they were intercepted by COVID-19 task force and brought to Abakaliki in line with government policy.³

With this development, the Governor announced contacts tracing of over 300 persons he might come in contact with after he announced that the victim tested positive of the virus. And on 19th April 2020, the Governor declared 7 to 7 curfews in the state. According to Edward Nnachi the governor in media broadcast maintains that “I hereby direct a total lockdown of the entire state from 7 am to 7 pm and anybody find outside within this period must be arrested and prosecuted.⁴ On April 25th, the Governor again on state-wide broadcast announced the second state index case believing to be a 27 old man who was arrested on April 25th by police at Ishieke junction, Abakaliki.⁵ Although the announcement raised a number of ill-feelings towards:

1. The authenticity of Index cases so far recorded and,
2. The unavailability of state or federal government palliatives to cushion the effects of the lockdown and other sundry issues in the state.

To ensure the effectiveness of the intrastate lockdown, Local Government council chairmen, Senior Special Advisers to the Governor, Commissioners, Deputy Governor, Technical Assistants and membership of neighbourhood watch were all charged to arrest and prosecute suspected COVID-19 victims with the Ebonyi State Township Stadium designated as the state fourteen days quarantine centre. The government also went ahead to inaugurate the Ebonyi State COVID-19 task force to man on the entrances and exits of the state with the hope of ensuring total compliance of the COVID-19 safety measures.

The Concept of Peace Building

Peace building is perhaps the one word that creates more passion, tension-free and thought-reliance research than any other word, in spite of where it is being mentioned. Debated, defined and studied for many decades now by scholars and academics, peace building remains at the frontline of many discussions,

government debates and media outlets. It dominates the international summits on the search for conflict-free society and as well as encourages mutual cooperation and relations. Peace building applies to a situation of a low conflict and high prospect for development. It could be pre- or post-war reconciliation phenomenon that often emphasis that parties into conflict have the capacity of establishing peaceful relationships through initiating joint community projects or a third-party negotiation peace process that deals with issues that lead to the outbreak of war. John Paul Lederach defines peace building as the efforts to transform potentially violent social relations into sustainable relations and outcomes.⁶ However, the 1986 International Conference on peace-building defined the concept as

...a positive, continuous cooperative human endeavour to build bridges between conflicting nations and groups. It aims to enhance understanding and communication and dispel the wandering roots of distrust, fear and hate.⁷

Peace-building is expected to create attitudes, behaviours and structure which will make future conflict improbable. For this reason, Halitza describes the term as the deliberate and systematic build-up of interactions, dense and durable, initiating a state in which the resumption of conflict would be improbable.⁸

Harbottle identifies the physical reconstructive component of peace-building in a post-war environment when he says that peace-building is a process of socio-economic reconstruction, development and expansion in conflict scarred and deprived areas and among underprivileged people.⁹ Amiara Solomon Amiara, Odi Peace and Nwobi Obiora maintain that the implication of Harbottle's definition of peace-building is that, the concept represents the process in which the alleged fear of the parties into social conflict is proportionately reduced in order to rebuild their confidence that conflict among them has been brought to halt.¹⁰ This means that peace-building is more meaningful after the cessation of hostilities, and involves things like assisting refugees and displaced persons to return and resettle in their homes; removal of abandoned mines especially in residential areas; provision of food, water, drugs and clothing; activation of damaged electricity and water supply lines, organization of elections, election monitoring, reconstruction of infrastructure like roads and bridges, rebuilding of damaged schools and hospitals, retaining of army and police. Most importantly,

peace-building deals with the root causes of the conflict and relates to confidence building.

Peace-building has been defined in different ways by different scholars, institutions, agencies and departments of peace. The term was first used in the 1970s by Johan Galtung when he called for the creation of peace building structures as a process of promoting sustainable peace by addressing the 'root causes' of violent conflict, and by supporting indigenous capacities for peace management and conflict resolution.¹¹ Since then, peace-building assumed a dominant factor in the pursuit of global peace and security. Over the years, scholars and institutions who have elaborated on the definitions of peace building had provided different meanings to the subject of peace-building.

For Elisabeth Porter, peace-building includes all the processes that build positive relationships, heal wounds, reconcile antagonistic differences, restore esteem, respect rights, meet basic needs, enhance equality, instil feelings of security, empower moral agency and are democratic, inclusive and just.¹² Peace however is believed to be a state of tranquillity and calmness that extends to love, joy and happiness. It is this process to ensure the state of calmness and tranquillity that leads to peace building. Therefore, peace psychologists have described peace building in terms of resolution, being proactive, problem solving, meeting human needs, and ending oppression and inequality.¹³

Peace-building therefore means a process of instilling cordial relationship and providing environment that forestalls hostility in order to ensure peaceful co-existence. It means a long and painstaking process which cannot be achieved in a hurry or within a fixed time limit. Hence failure to recognize this may mean that resources, monies and hard-won improvements are often wasted. This practically explains the link between the Ebonyi Government politics of COVID-19 measure and the processes of peace building process in the state.

The Politics of COVID-19 Palliatives in Ebonyi State

One remarkable achievement of the Ebonyi State Government was to keep the citizens writing names and expecting the distribution of COVID-19 palliatives. The distribution of government COVID-19 palliatives was highly politicized in the state. For more than four months of the lockdown, the state government engaged her political appointees to compile names of the various indigenes of the state from

wards to the state as a preparation for the distribution of government COVID-19 palliatives. Generally, politicians at various levels of the state took advantage of this mandate and limited what supposed to be for everybody to party affairs. By this, names that were compiled were mainly those of the People's Democratic Party. In fact, the politicians saw the exercise as a process of settling their party loyalists in order to keep them loyal for future use unfortunately, the pandemic was not for the PDP followers only but for both parties.

For example, *in the Voice Newspapers*, Dr Kenneth Ugbala while speaking on behalf of the governor on virtual Executive Council meeting held on 14th July maintains that the 'EXCO approved that the sharing of the palliatives that is meant for COVID-19, should start this coming Saturday, July 18th 2020. And it will be done ward by ward and in polling units as already agreed. It will be left in the hands of the highest stakeholder of the polling unit, who will take responsibility, so that if anything happens, we can hold such person accountable.¹⁴ This was a negation to equity and right to fairness as those from opposition parties were discriminated from the exercise. Though, Igom maintains that the Ebonyi State COVID-19 distribution committee was drawn from members of the PDP, APC and Christian Association of Nigeria. Meanwhile, while the lockdown commenced on March 19, it took the state government up to five months to release the palliatives to be distributed to the people. In other words, *the Voice* further maintains that 'the long-awaited palliatives are now to be shared to Ebonyians.¹⁵ Unfortunately, some of those palliatives were mainly donated by federal government in which the state governors sought to be allowed to oversee their distribution. According to Sadiya Umar-Farouk, state governors had recently requested that they would be allowed to oversee the distribution of palliatives to cushion the effects of COVID-19.¹⁶ This was to give them the opportunity to turn it into political gains. For example, on 12th May, 2020, the chairman of All Progressive Congress (APC) on radio briefing listed conditions that must be fulfilled for the party to participate in the COVID-19 distribution committee. The conditions came immediately the Ebonyi State House of Assembly speaker; Rt Hon Francis Nwiferu had announced that the committee on COVID-19 distribution would embark on repackaging the rice to bear the picture or image of the Ebonyi State Governor. The opposition parties in the state saw it as a process to popularize the PDP government. Nnamdi Nwogha maintains that among the food items given were over 7000 bags of rice, cartons of indomie, tomatoes and groundnut oil. These were the Federal Government

palliatives given to every state and up till now, Ikwo, Izzi and Ohaozara LGAs have not been given.¹⁷

Similarly, Emeka Anosike maintains that except the three Local Governments that were not given, every polling unit in the remaining 10 Local Government Areas got 20 bags of 5kg rice, tomatoes, indomie noodles as government palliatives and it was shared on August 1, 2020.¹⁸ In fact, the questions that should be asked are:

1. Why was the sharing of palliatives delayed until after the lockdown had been relaxed?
2. Who were those 20 persons that got the palliatives at the polling units?
3. Is it only 20 persons that cast their votes in each polling unit?

The Politics of COVID-19 Palliative as Peace Building Process in Ebonyi State

As the number of index cases continues to increase daily, the Federal Government's decision to lockdown state borders, markets, schools, worship centers, club houses, bars etc, came into full implementations. By this, States' governments all over the federation were to further restrict movements within the states so that there would be no opportunity to further spread the virus. In doing that, all the 36 states of the federation at one time or the other announced from dawn till dusk curfew expecting that the spread of the virus would be checkmated. With this announcement however, some relief items were expected unfortunately. This was the period the Ebonyi State Government announced the full implementation of its policy to relocate traders from Abakpa Main Market to Regional Market along the Ogoja-Abalakiki express way. The enforcement of this order created another severe economic hardship to the people in number of ways:

1. One of such problems is that there was a total disconnect between availability and affordability of commodities in Ebonyi State International Markets. Buyers from distant parts of the state who were not acquainted with the Ebonyi State COVID-19 safety measures such as wearing of facemask were charged for flouting COVID-19 regulations and such victim has to pay a fine of Ten thousand naira (₦10,000). Uchenna Orji notes that traders were chased from the market at unauthorized period while market leaders collect ₦50 from each of them to allow them into the market.¹⁸

There was also a situation in which traders in old Abakpa Main Market had their goods and shops locked up for two weeks without any sale as they were being

asked to relocate to the International Market. Peter Tobias said that some of them who did not have five hundred and twenty thousand (₦520,000) to pay for a shop became frustrated and those who paid were not able to sort out for their accommodation but later had their money declared payment for intent form hence they were asked to pay another two million, two hundred thousand (₦2,200,000) shops' price tag.¹⁹

Petty traders who usually come out in the evening around the old Abakpa Main Market had their commodities ceased for number of periods with a fine fee of (₦10,000). With the state of affair, the 7am -7pm curfew further impacted negatively to both the traders and buyers who expected government palliative to ameliorate their economic hardship.

Therefore, the situation created by the outbreak of COVID-19 and the expectancy of relief materials entails that government policies within the period should be people friendly. To that extent, Amiara, Solomon Amiara and Paul Uroko Omeje maintain that to create peace means that politics must be mediated by stable structures and secular culture. Its implication means that the latter ensures that citizens become more politically participatory in the state activities whereas political values such as tolerance, bargaining and negotiation are made the political norms.²⁰ For example, since peace and security are the outcome of political decisions, the provision of COVID-19 palliatives assumes the only means through which peace and security can be assured. By this, it is expected that the palliatives will mitigate the corona virus effects to the extent that people will not revolt against governments' decision to lockdown interstate borders.

Therefore, since politics involves a lot of tricks and convictions, COVID-19 palliatives in Ebonyi State becomes part of the tricks to get the citizens obey and believe that government is working to ensure that people are assisted from the rampaging corona virus disease. In other words, there were expectations that moneies would be given and food items distributed to cushion the effects of the global pandemic as people were admonished to avoid anything capable of truncating peace in the state. By this, the decision to give the citizens palliatives was viewed as a laudable project especially as the announcement conveyed an impression that it was government primary responsibility to prioritize the welfare of the citizens amid the COVID-19 outbreak. This however, was believed to stymie the spread of the virus and ensure total and comprehensive compliance to all COVID-19 safety measures in the state.

The Achievements of the COVID-19 Palliatives

The decision to give palliatives to the teeming population of Nigeria was in some quarters viewed as a responsible gesture from the government. While in some other places, it was seen as empty promises from politicians to further divert peoples' attention away from their demanding for the sharing of the palliatives. Whether or not the palliatives were lofty ambitions of government to the people remains a subject to personal assessment and from which state is the assessment being made but obviously, the palliatives came with a lot of achievements. In fact, one of the areas the government palliatives contributed to the well-being of people is the provisions of soft loans to farmers and traders in Nigeria. Isaac Omo-Ehiabhi Eranga opines that as a way to cushion the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown, the government of Nigeria rolled out the following palliative measures to targeted groups: three months interest holiday for those holding Trademoni, Marketmoni and Farmermoni issued by the Bank of Industry, Bank of Agriculture and the Nigeria Export and Import Bank.²¹ These loans were given to encourage farmers and traders boost their farm production and businesses. By this, Eranga further explains those loans as:

1. TradeMoni: This is a loan program of the Federal Government created specifically for petty traders and artisans across Nigeria. It is a part of the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP) scheme of Federal Government being executed by the bank of industry. With TradeMoni an individual can receive interest-free loan from Nigeria naira of ₦10, 000 (Exchange rate US\$1=₦400) and growing all the way to ₦100, 000 as the person pays back.
2. MarketMoni as another Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program issues interest-free loans to the market women and traders, artisan, youths and farmers. It is one of the social intervention programs of the federal government, and is being executed by Bank of Industry. In Market Moni, beneficiaries receive loans ranging from ₦10, 000 to ₦100, 000 per applicant as long as 6 months. In fact, MarketMoni attracts no interest except a one-time 5% administrative fee.
3. FarmersMoni: This is Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP) initiative created to boost Nigerian economy through leverage and access to finance for farmers. FarmerMoni is designed to help petty traders

expand their trade through the provision of collateral free-loans. In other words, the loans are repayable over a period of six months.²²

Apart from these loans, there were other achievements of these palliatives to the state. There were individual donations from prominent Ebonyians who gave palliatives to assist the people of Ebonyi. Such donations went along way to assist vulnerable people who could not fend for themselves.

Conclusion

The outbreak of the corona virus disease had provided the world with a litmus test to access the weakness of humanity. The pandemic proved that countries that have come under the daggers drawn of political supremacy are very weak to stymie the spread of the disease and to that extent, precautionary measures like closing of international borders, national lockdown, physical and social distancing, wearing of facemasks and sanitizing of one's hands were considered as alternative means of survival and safety. It is against this background that it was expected that national governments would provide palliatives for their citizens so that the difficulties of the lockdown could be mitigated. In this context, Nigerian Government having recorded her first index case swung into action by announcing the distribution of ₦500 billion COVID-19 crisis intervention fund with the president further announcing that a cash grant of ₦10 billion be given to Lagos state as it has the country's highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases. While a five-billion-naira special intervention fund be given to Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, to support states in COVID-19 and coordinate surveillance of the disease and public health responses nationwide. As the number of index cases increased in the country, Federal Government through the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development was charged with the implementation of palliative measure while expecting that States' Governments all over the federation would complement the palliatives gesture. Rather than queuing into the federal program, the States Governments opted to be allowed to share the palliatives.

In Ebonyi, the state government announced that names would be compiled at the various Polling Units under the supervision of the highest political office holders for the distribution of palliatives. This process took about five months to be concluded. While the lockdown was announced on March 19, the distribution of the palliatives started on August 1, 2020 and out of the thirteen Local Government

Areas, two LGAs were not given. Through the process of compiling names, most of the food items given to Ebonyi State Government by Federal Government got perished and weren't enough to be shared again. Hence this study maintains that the politics of COVID-19 palliative was a process of peace building that diverted the attention of people away from attacking the Ebonyi State Government.

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