PUBLIC POLICY AND INEQUALITY IN NIGERIA: AN INTERROGATION

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ABSTRACT
Inequality is a pressing issue in many societies and Nigeria in particular and policymakers face the challenge of creating effective policies to address it. This is why people-based policymaking is germane in developing policies that are tailored to the specific needs of different groups. Hence, addressing the root causes of inequality, it is possible to create a more just and equitable society for all. The paper adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on secondary sources such as policy documents, scholarly articles, official reports, relevant blog post, newspapers and books to examine the correlation and impact of public policy on inequality in Nigeria. Using content analysis, the study identified themes and patterns in the sourced secondary data and equally interpret the findings using the Pareto principle which states that a small number of causes are responsible for the majority of outcomes, can help to identify the most important factors that need to be addressed. The study recommends that the government should prioritize the fight against systematic corruption in Nigeria by allowing the principle of the rule of law prevail. The study also recommends for an increase in funding for social safety net programs, such as unemployment benefit, food assistance, in order to help reduce poverty and inequality.

Introduction

Nigeria as a country is bedeviled with the multifaceted menace of inequality which stretches from economic, social, and political. The level of inequality has since worsened since its post-colonial inception especially in terms of income and opportunity. Studies show that the covid-19 pandemic, the fuel subsidy removal, insecurity among other factors are responsible for such quack mires (Nwachukwu, 2021). Paradoxically, the country has a growing economy, but the benefits of this growth have not been evenly distributed, and a significant portion of the population remains in poverty. Despite Nigeria's economic growth, over 46% of the population still lives below the poverty line (Worlbank, 2023 cited in Fayokemi, 2023). In addition, inequality has led to increased social tensions and violence, as well as political instability. The lack of opportunity for the poor

has also led to a brain drain, with many of the country's best and brightest leaving for other countries in search of a better life. Reports show that the country has a high Gini coefficient, which clearly translates the level of inequality in the country. According to the Statistica (2024a) the Gini coefficient for Nigeria as at 2023 is 0.35 and a 0.468 in 2019, which indicates a high level of inequality. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the country's reliance on oil as its main source of income, the prevalence of corruption, and the lack of equal access to education and healthcare. These factors create a cycle of poverty and inequality that is difficult to break, leading to negative consequences for the country as a whole.

From past studies, there is a complex relationship between public policy and inequality in Nigeria. On the one hand, public policy can be used to reduce inequality by providing access to basic services like healthcare and education, as well as creating opportunities for employment and economic development. On the other hand, public policy can also contribute to inequality by creating barriers to access and by reinforcing existing power structures and inequality (Awortu, 2014; Salau, 2012; Ihonvbere, 2010; Maduekwe, 2011;) Hence, Public policy plays a crucial role in addressing issues like inequality among others, but the country's policies have so far been inadequate in achieving this goal (Salau, 2012; Ihonvbere, 2010; Maduekwe, 2011).A number of policies have been formulated and aimed at reforming the economy and providing more opportunities for the poor, but these efforts have been limited by the entrenched power of the wealthy elite. In addition, the political system has been characterized by instability, making it difficult to implement long-term solutions. It is against this backdrop that this paper assess public policy and inequality in Nigeria, while looking at the correlation, and the measurable of the former on the later within the socio-economic dimension. The paper is partitioned as follows and includes this introduction. The remaining parts of the paper shall include the following: the methodology, followed by a review of related literature, theoretical framework, and the discussions followed with a conclusion and recommendations.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on secondary sources such as policy documents, scholarly articles, official reports, relevant blog post, newspapers and books, to examine the correlation and impact of public policy on inequality in Nigeria. Using content analysis, the study will identify themes and patterns in the sourced secondary data, and equally interpret the findings using relevant theories and public policy concepts. The study will use case studies to provide specific examples and explore the effects of public policies on different groups of people in Nigeria. Finally, the study will draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the findings.

Conceptual Review

Inequality

Inequality is defined as the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and power among individuals or groups in society. In Nigeria, inequality manifests itself in a variety of ways, including income inequality, educational inequality, health inequality, and gender inequality (Ojo, 2018). Similarly, Haughton &Khandker cited in Ojo (2020) argued that inequality is the uneven distribution of resources especially among the different classes within a society. This corroborates the findings of a report by the United Nations (2013) which states that the disparities in the economic and social distribution are a bane to development. Economic inequality is often tied to other forms of social inequalities that plagues Nigerians, especially those being marginalized on the ground of ethnicity, religion or language (Kabeer, 2010). The impact is often felt by those marginalized or socially excluded groups and they are mostly concentrated in disadvantaged locations. The social, economic and spatial inequalities also contribute to political inequalities (UNDP, 2013). Inequality to Bryce (1923) is the differences in wealth among men and woman, especially in the distribution of worldly wealth. Bryce definition when looked at critically points to the structured system of gender inequality which is a major form of inequality in Nigeria.

Appadorai (1975) defines equality as the opposite of inequality- the unequal provision of opportunities for all: the right to work, to provide wages, to reasonable hours of labour and leisure and to self-government in industry,

so that everyone may have a fair start in life and the chance to develop the best that he is capable of. Deductively, it can be asserted that because men's differences in need and capacity are too great to be sustained for a lengthy period of time, at least there should be a leveled playing ground to allow persons, gender, income, caste, race, religion and affiliations. Interestingly, Hume (1922) warned that concepts like inequality and equality can best be understood from a relative and not absolute lens. He holds that "wherever we depart from equality, we rob the poor of more satisfaction than we add to the rich". The rule of equality is useful and has been shown by history to be not wholly impracticable. By adopting it, we avoid the ugly spectable of an economic system in which the luxury of a few is paralleled by the misery of the many.

Public Policy

According to Lindblom (1979) public policy refers to the actions and decisions of governments that are intended to address societal problems and achieve specific goals. This definition highlights the link between public policy and the exercise of state power. Ideally, it involves a range of actors, including elected officials, government bureaucrats, interest groups, and citizens (Easton, 1965). According to (Ojo, 2020) the process of developing and implementing public policy is complex and contentious, but it is essential for addressing societal challenges and improving the lives of citizens. According to Osaghae (2010) public policy can be defined as a purposive course of action undertaken by a government to address a societal problem or achieve a specific goal. The actions taken in the pursuit of public policy are determined by a complex set of factors, including political institutions, societal values, and economic conditions. Additionally, the effectiveness of public policy is determined by a variety of factors, including the clarity of goals, the availability of resources, and the level of public support for the government/policy.

One of the leading definitions of public policy comes from political scientist John Kingdon (2003), he holds that public policy is "a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern." This definition highlights the intentionality of public policy and its focus on addressing issues of concern in the eyes of the government. Another scholar, Dryzek (1987) defines public policy as "a course of action taken by a government in response to social or economic issues." Dryzek's definition emphasizes the importance of considering the context and the social and economic factors that influence public policy. Similarly, Dye (1996) sees Public policy as whatever governments choose to do or not to do. Dye's definition emphasizes the element of choice in public policy and highlights the fact that governments have the power to both act and refrain from acting. At this juncture, it is worth noting that public policy is a complex and evolving field. This accounts for the different approaches and definitions of the concept. Hence, it can be concluded that it is the most pertinent tools that can be employed to address inequality, and it's important for policymakers to continually evaluate and adapt their policies based on the changing needs of society.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Pareto principle/theory to explain the correlation between public policy and inequality in Nigeria. The concept was first developed by the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto in the early 1900s. Pareto observed that a small number of individuals or firms tended to have a disproportionate amount of wealth or income, and he proposed the 80/20 rule as a way to explain this phenomenon (Pareto, 2014). The Pareto principle, suggests that a small number of inputs can lead to a disproportionately large impact. In the context of public policy and inequality in Nigeria, this means that a few key policies could have a major impact on reducing inequality. Marginal returns, or the diminishing returns of additional efforts, suggest that the most impactful policies may have already been implemented. The Pareto principle provides a useful lens for analyzing the potential for reducing inequality through public policy in Nigeria (Thomas &Kvilhaug, 2022).

As there are no roses without thorns, there are a few criticisms that have been raised about the Pareto principle and its use in analyzing policy effectiveness. One criticism is that it oversimplifies the complexity of real-world problems and ignores the many factors that contribute to inequality. Another criticism is that it can lead to a focus on the "quick wins" rather than long-term solutions to inequality (Friedrich, 1965). Despite this criticism the Pareto's principles will be used to explain the correlation

between inequality and public policy in Nigeria. This is because the principle has some distinctive strengths: It can help to prioritize policy options based on their potential impact, which can be useful for decision makers who are faced with limited budget as is always alleged in the case of Nigeria. Again, it can provide a quantitative measure of policy outcomes, which can be useful for evaluating the effectiveness of policies.

Dimensions of Inequality in Nigeria

Inequality in Nigeria is multidimensional and nebulous. According to (Ikpe, 2016) inequality is largely due to the uneven distribution of wealth and resources, as well as the lack of opportunities for the poor to improve their economic status. To Ikpe (2016) multiple dimensions of inequality in Nigeria is comprised of economic inequality, political inequality, social inequality, and gender inequality. In terms of economic inequality, there is a large disparity between the rich and the poor, with the richest 10% of the population owning 70% of the country's wealth (Ogunbode,2016; Nwachukwu; 2021). Political inequality is evident in the concentration of power and resources among a small elite, while social inequality is reflected in the lack of access to basic services for many Nigerians. Finally, gender inequality is a major issue, with women facing discrimination in areas such as education, employment, and property ownership.

Political inequality

Political inequality is one of the most protested form of inequality in Nigeria (Oyediran&Olorunfemi, 2015; Ogunbode, 2016; Ikpe, 2016). One of the central aspects is the unequal distribution of political power. For example, a small group of elites hold most of the political power, while the majority of the population has little say in how the country is run. This is reflected in the country's high level of corruption and the lack of accountability of politicians to the people they represent. In addition, there is a lack of transparency in the country's political system, making it difficult for ordinary citizens to participate in the political process.Badejo (2006) argued that another form of political inequality is the unequal access to resources. This vein of argument maintains that Nigeria's political elite controls a disproportionate share of the country's wealth and resources, while the majority of the population has limited access to basic services such as healthcare and education. This inequality is further exacerbated by the lack of investment in infrastructure and social programs, which disproportionately affects the poor (Oyediran&Olorunfemi, 2015; Ogunbode, 2016; Ikpe, 2016).

Another dimension of political inequality is the lack of representation of marginalized groups in the political process. For example, women are severely underrepresented in government and politics, holding only 6% of seats in the Nigerian parliament (Statistica, 2024b). Similarly, people from minority ethnic groups are also underrepresented, and their voices are often not heard in the decision-making process (Mustapha, 2005). One of the main causes is the country's colonial history, which has left a legacy of inequality and marginalization. The country's first post-independence government was dominated by a small elite from the north of the country, and this legacy of power concentration has continued to the present day. Another cause is the lack of political reforms, which has allowed the existing political system to become entrenched and resistant to change (Badejo, 2006).

Social Inequality

Social inequality is a complex phenomenon. In the political lens, one of the main concepts in this context is "power." Inequality is caused by unequal access to power, and this power is expressed in many ways. For example, those who have more wealth also tend to have more political power, because they can use their wealth to influence politicians and shape policy. Another concept that is related to power is "social exclusion," which refers to people being excluded from certain groups or opportunities. This can happen because of discrimination, or simply because of a lack of resources or knowledge (Emuze, 2011). One of the main social dimensions to inequality in Nigeria is educational inequality, which is also a major issue in the country. Research has shown that there are significant disparities in educational attainment between different groups in Nigeria, with certain regions and ethnic groups having lower levels of education than others, particularly for women and girls (Ajayi & Oluwafumi, 2014; Oyediran & Olorunfemi, 2015). Barkindo (2007) argued that This is related to the high levels of poverty in the

country, which make it difficult for families to afford school fees or other expenses related to education. In addition, there are cultural norms and religious beliefs that can discourage girls from attending school. Another important issue is the high rate of child marriage, which prevents girls from completing their education and limits their opportunities in life.

In addition to education, there are also issues of social inequality related to health care. There is a large gap in health outcomes between the rich and poor in Nigeria, and this is especially evident in maternal and infant mortality rates. In addition, there is a lack of access to clean water and sanitation, which contributes to a high rate of preventable diseases. This inequality in health care is related to the overall inequality in wealth and social status in the country (Olukoshi, 2011; Barkindo, 2007). Social inequality is interlinked with the political inequality. Barkindo (2007) and Emuze (2011) argued that many issues of social inequality are related to political representation and participation. For example, women are underrepresented in elected office, and they face barriers to participating in political life. The same is true for people from certain ethnic groups and other marginalized communities. Even when people are able to participate in the political process, there is a lack of trust in the government and its institutions, which can lead to apathy and disillusionment.

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality is another major issue in Nigeria, and it manifests in many different ways. Women are less likely to be employed, and when they are employed, they are often paid less than men for doing the same work. They also have fewer opportunities for advancement and often face harassment and discrimination in the workplace (Barkindo, 2007; Olukoshi, 2011). The most pronounced form of gender inequality in Nigeria is violence against women and girls. Women and girls face a high risk of violence in many different forms, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking (Olukoshi, 2011). This violence is often not reported or addressed, and even when it is, there are often few resources available to support survivors. These forms of violence are an important part of the gender inequality that exists in Nigeria.

Economic Inequality

There is a significant level of economic inequality in Nigeria, with a small number of people controlling a large percentage of the country's wealth. According to the World Inequality Database, the top 1% of earners in Nigeria control around 43% of the country's wealth. This level of inequality has been linked to a number of social and economic problems, including poverty, crime, and unrest. It is also thought to be a factor in the country's low level of human development (Abebe et al., 2016). One of the main causes of economic inequality in Nigeria is the country's dependence on oil (Onifade, 2014; Uche, 2012). The oil industry is highly lucrative, and those who work in the industry or have access to oil revenues tend to be much wealthier than the average person. In addition, the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few elites has led to a lack of competition and investment in other sectors of the economy. This has limited opportunities for people to move out of poverty and improve their standard of living.

According to Ajayi&Oluwafemi (2014) the countries education system is an important cause of economic inequality. The quality of education is often very poor, and there is a significant disparity in educational opportunities between different regions and socioeconomic groups. This has led to a large gap in skills and knowledge between the rich and the poor, which in turn has contributed to economic inequality. In addition, the country's health system is also quite unequal, with those who can afford private healthcare having access to much better care than those who rely on the public system (Emuze, 2011).

Reassessing Public policy and Inequality in Nigeria: The Nexus (Applying Pareto's Principles)

It is evident that there is a lot of variation in the relationship between inequality and public policy, which is obviously dependent on the specific policies that are in place, but especially its impact on the lives of the common people (Nwachukwu, 2021).In the context of the limitations of the National Cash Transfer program and other social programs in Nigeria, the Pareto principle is used in this section to explain why the programs have had limited success in reducing inequality. Applicably, the

Pareto's principle suggests that the high levels of corruption and weak institutions retards policies for equality in Nigeria (Vilfredo, 2014). Evidently, assessing the National Cash Transfer Program (NCTP) using the Pareto's lens, it is evident that the program has not had a significant impact on reducing inequality in Nigeria because, though, the program targets poor and vulnerable households with cash transfers, it is limited in scale and does not reach a large number of people. This is due to the high bureaucratic corruption that plagues the Nigerian social and political systems respectively. The program is also not well-funded, which limits its ability to make a significant impact. Furthermore, the program has not been successful in addressing some of the underlying causes of poverty, such as lack of access to education and healthcare.

Another example is The Home Grown School Feeding Program (HGSFP) which was launched in 2016 as part of the Federal Government of Nigeria's National Social Investment Program (NSIP). The program is designed to provide free meals to students in public primary schools and encourage the development of local farming and food production. The HGSFP has been implemented in 34 states and the Federal Capital Territory, reaching over 9.6 million children in 2019 (Uwa et al., 2020). The HGSFP has faced some challenges, including inadequate funding, food shortages, and challenges with the delivery of food to schools. Again, the policy lacked the structure for sustainability. When assessed critically, it is evident that the bureaucratic corruption plays out in the implementation of the policy, hence retarding any growth that program aims to achieve. A small portion of corrupt individuals have a colossal impact on over 200 million people. This policy can be described as the 20 for 80 in the war against inequality through policies, however, the 20 is deaminized further expanding the inequality gap in Nigeria.

A similar policy is the N-Power Program, the program has been implemented through a number of different initiatives, including the N-Power Knowledge Initiative, N-Power Volunteer Corps, and N-Power Build. The N-Power Knowledge Initiative is a skills acquisition program that provides training in various fields, such as software development, animation, and creative arts (Uwa et al., 2020). The N-Power Volunteer Corps is a paid volunteer program that aims to improve access to basic education, primary healthcare, and agricultural extension services. N-Power Build provides technical and vocational training in various trades, such as plumbing, carpentry, and masonry (Ogbondah & Aguocha, 2020; Uwa, 2020). A government report shows that the N-Power Volunteer Corps increased the income of participants by an average of 20%, and it also increased the likelihood of participants being employed after the program by 35% (FGN, 2022). According to Ogbondah & Aguocha (2020) the N-Power Knowledge Initiative has also been shown to improve the employability of participants, with over 80% of participants reporting an increase in their skills after the program. These are just some of the positive impacts of the program on the lives of beneficiaries. In the critical lens of the Pareto principles, the N-Power program has not had a significant impact on reducing inequality in Nigeria. The program provides training and skills development for young people, but it is limited in scope and does not reach a large number of people. In addition, the program does not address some of the structural issues that contribute to inequality, such as lack of access to education and healthcare, as well as limited job opportunities.

Similarly, the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Program (GEEP) was created to increase access to credit for microenterprises and small businesses, particularly those run by women and young people. The program provides loans through a network of microfinance banks, as well as capacity building and training for beneficiaries (NBS, n.d; Igwe; 2019). There are three main components of the program: TraderMoni, MarketMoni, and FarmerMoni. TraderMoni provides loans of up to N50, 000 (about $135) to microenterprises, while MarketMoni provides loans of up to N350, 000 (about $945) to small businesses. FarmerMoni provides loans of up to N500, 000 (about $1,350) to farmers. The program also provides support for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the form of training and mentorship (Igwe, 2019). However, the program provides loans and other forms of financial assistance to micro, small, and medium enterprises, but it does not have the resources to reach a large number of businesses. Additionally, the program does not address some of the underlying issues that contribute to inequality, such as lack of access to credit and other forms of support for small businesses. Hence, the policy is limited in its ability to reduce inequality in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, known as inequality, is a major challenge for policymakers. The Pareto principle can be used to understand and address the issue of inequality in public policy. By focusing on both improving existing programs and designing new ones, it's possible to make progress in reducing inequality. However, this is a complex and challenging process, and it requires strong institutions and a commitment to transparency and accountability. Addressing this challenge requires a two-pronged approach, focusing on improving existing programs and designing new ones that are specifically tailored to address inequality. However, it's important to note that this process is complex and requires strong institutions and a commitment to transparency and accountability. Without these factors in place, it will be difficult to achieve the desired results. In order to create policies that effectively address inequality, it's important to consider the various factors that contribute to inequality. These factors can include socioeconomic status, gender, race, age, and geographic location. It's also important to understand how inequality affects different groups and regions. Once these factors are understood, policymakers can develop targeted policies that address the specific needs of different groups. This approach is known as evidence-based policymaking.

Recommendation

The study recommends that the government should prioritize the fight against systematic and bureaucratic corruption in Nigeria by allowing the principle of the rule of law prevail. Secondly, since the role of government is vital as the major driver of the economy through its monetary and fiscal policy actions, it can catalyze the economy to the desired state by either increase or decrease in spending, monetary policy rates regime, trade options and the stabilization of the exchange rate, promotion of free-market economic policies that will promote growth which ultimately will raise living standards. The study also recommends for an increase in funding for social safety net programs, such as unemployment benefit, food assistance, in order to help reduce poverty and inequality.

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