

Non-State Actors as Partners in the Response to COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

William E. Odion, PhD

Department of Political Science
Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Nigeria
erdion33@yahoo.co.uk; erdion33@aauekpoma.edu.ng

Patrick N. Uhumwangho

Department of Social Science
College of Education, Igueben, Edo State, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper is an examination of the response of the NSAs support services amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Government incapacity and severe human needs motivated the NSAs to adapt quickly and rose to the challenges of helping to mitigate the effect of a ravaging pandemic. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources and personal observation. The study demonstrated how NSAs responded to the challenges of the pandemic by monitoring palliatives distribution, providing isolation centres and mobilising and sensitising the general public; provided insights into the weak capacity of the state that necessitated the NSAs intervention and challenges encountered. Lessons learnt were captured in 'new normal' and understanding of how relevant NSAs can be in a pandemic situation as tool for mobilisation. It was concluded that the nature of NSAs intervention was essentially collaborative and complementary. Among the recommendations were that NSAs be encouraged by government to do more for the citizens, especially during emergencies, increased funding of public health sector and regular accreditation of health facilities.

Keywords: Pandemic, COVID-19, New normal, Palliatives, Response

Introduction

Coronavirus disease, commonly referred to as COVID-19 (because the outbreak was recorded in 2019) (Donnelly & Hassan, 2020) was a global pandemic that ravaged the world. The outbreak was first noticed in the city of Wuhan in China in 2019, while the first incident was recorded in Nigeria on February 27, 2020 (Donnelly & Hassan, 2020). It revealed the unpreparedness of Nigeria's public health infrastructures to handle health challenges, with no proven and available medical response. Obviously, public health facilities were overwhelmed by this pandemic in Nigeria and the world. Though the disease has claimed many lives across the globe, fortunately for Nigeria and Africa, the record is less compared to other countries/continents. The low record can be attributed to inadequate data, testing challenges and difficulty in contact tracing. Among the countries that are worst hit are China, United States of America, Britain, Russia and Italy. In Nigeria, several disruptions were recorded with the virus claiming the lives of notable personalities such as politicians, businessmen and others among whom was Abba Kyari-ex Chief of Staff to the President, and forced others into isolation.

International migration/travel from hotspots facilitated the spread of the disease from country to country, Nigeria inclusive. Among the notable symptoms of the disease according to health authorities and experts (WHO, 2019), were coughing, sneezing, respiratory tract infection, high temperature, itching and dry throat as well as loss of senses of taste and smell. The

preventive measures according to health experts included regular hand washing, use of face mask, campaign for social/physical distancing, as well as regular use of hand sanitisers. The pandemic caused serious socio, economic and political disruptions in Nigeria and accentuated/activated 'new normal' and opportunities. The initial reaction of the state was to set up a Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 whose aim was to develop a national strategy for the management of the pandemic. In the light of the overwhelming nature of the pandemic, inadequate and dilapidated health infrastructure and glaring evidences of government incapacity to handle the pandemic due to past neglect of the facilities, the NSAs had to intervene to assist and support the government and people.

The focus of this paper is on NSAs intervention in a pandemic situation, while the main objectives are to clarify the concept of non-state actors' involvement in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic; investigate the nature of NSAs intervention in a pandemic; interrogate the character of the Nigerian state that propelled the NSAs to get involved; and identify the challenges that were encountered and the new realities introduced by the pandemic. Arising from the above, the research questions to investigate are: What is meant by NSAs within the context of the fight against COVID-19 pandemic in this paper? What was the nature of the NSAs intervention? What is the character of the Nigerian state that created the platform for the NSAs to intervene? What were the challenges they encountered? What were some of the new realities that were introduced by the pandemic?

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the role theory is adopted as the theoretical framework for analysing the contributions of non-state actors as partners in the response to COVID-19 pandemic. It is a theoretical framework that is devoted to the study of behaviour, with emphasis on role. Through the works of scholars like Mead (1934), Banton (1965), Biddle (1979) and Benes (2011), the theory was popularised. It posits that each social role is a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms and behaviours that a person has to face or fulfill (<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index>). Highlights of the propositions of the role theory about social behaviour are as follows: (i) the division of labor in society take the form of the interaction among heterogeneous specialised positions that are called roles. (ii) social roles include appropriate and permitted forms of behaviour, guided by social norms, which are commonly known and hence determine expectations. (iii) roles are occupied by individuals, who are called "actors." (iv) change conditions can render a social role outdated or illegitimate, in which case social pressures are likely to lead to role change (<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index>).

Methodology

The data gathered for this paper were generated from secondary sources. These sources included textbooks, journals, newspapers and internet materials. The materials sourced were mostly on issues of the pandemic and responses in Nigeria. Specifically, data gathered related to issues during the pandemic period. Some of the newspapers sampled because of their wide coverage and availability included *Vanguard*, *ThisDay* and *The Guardian*. However, personal observation arising from participation in the activities of Concerned Ekpoma Eminent Stakeholders Forum (CEESF) during the pandemic also played a fundamental role as it helped in strengthening the analysis.

The argument of the role theory is that an analogy can be drawn between individuals (in a society) and the state. This implies that the roles ascribed to individuals in the society are applied in the explanation of the behaviour of the state (Benes, 2011). Furthermore, Chafetz (1997) had argued that actors usually have multiple roles that vary in overall importance (centrality) and according to the situation (context or salience). In lending support to the above, it also means that an individual or group may play multiple roles simultaneously depending on the situation (Sekhri, 2009). It is, however, important to note that humans and groups usually maintain a repertoire of roles and identities, so long each provides roles of appropriate behaviour in situations for which they are relevant (March & Olsen, 2004). It is obvious from the analysis above that the roles theory is very relevant in examining the contributions of non-state actors as partners in the response to COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, NSAs, both as individuals and group played active and significant role during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Non State Actors (NSAs) Intervention in a Pandemic

NSAs are organisations and individuals that are not affiliated with, directed by or funded through the government (NSA, 2019). In the context of this paper, NSAs are non-governmental functionaries within the state who individually or collectively (in group) or through various platforms other than the formal government structure helped to promote societal values and norms. They are groups around which the civil populace built their various identities for the purpose of promoting their various interests. NSAs in the context of this paper include faith based organisations (religious institutions), financial institutions, corporate bodies/organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and individuals such as business magnates and political elites. These groups impacted greatly on the management of the pandemic in Nigeria.

In international politics, NSAs play a major role in foreign policy making in nation states, and significantly influence their foreign policy behaviour, lobby in domestic as well as international setting, mobilise their home or host states and national and global opinion. In the Nigerian context, particularly within the COVID-19 pandemic era, they played essentially mitigating, complementary, collaborative, mobilising and analytical roles. They never represented any government body but influenced government decisions. Hence they add new layers of rules and expectations. The nature and interventions of the NSAs within the COVID-19 pandemic period were:

Provision of Property for Isolation Purposes: Several of the NSAs provided properties to government for isolation purposes. This role was to collaborate and complement governments' effort. Realising that the capacity of government was limited in this direction, NSAs had to intervene to rescue the situation. For example, *ThisDay* and Arise Media in association with notable partners donated a 300 (scalable to 500 if the need arises) capacity Dome in Abuja to be converted into an isolation centre as their contribution towards fighting the dreaded Coronavirus in Nigeria (Ifijeh, 2020 & Ityokura, 2020). The facility was a collaborative private sector driven initiative donated by a consortium of like-minded partners, powered by *ThisDay*, Sahara Energy Group (Sahara Foundation), the Corporate Coalition Against COVID-19 (CCACOV19), Africa Finance Corporation and the Chinese Civil Engineering and Construction Company (CCECC). The CCECC handled the internal partitioning. In the same vein, as part of his individual contribution, former President Olusegun Obasanjo made available his 32-room former residence

and hotel facility at Abeokuta, Ogun State to Ogun State Government as isolation centre for victims of the dreaded COVID-19 (Ogunnaike, 2020).

Monitoring of the Distribution of Palliatives: NSAs helped in monitoring of palliatives brought and distributed by the government at all levels. The monitoring spanned through provision of palliatives, allocation of palliatives to the various states and local governments, up to local wards where the target beneficiaries resided. The essence of this was to prevent hijack and diversion of such palliatives in the process. Alluding to the submission of Oyovbaire (2001), they also monitored governance, identify and brought to the notice of the state issues and cases that grieved and cause disaffections and divisions and agitate for the inclusiveness of deprived and hitherto excluded groups in the distribution of state resources and actions. As the Nigerian experience had shown, but for the intervention of NSAs, many of the palliatives would have been diverted mostly by politicians and sold or distributed on partisan basis, particularly when the State and its key institutions, structures and functionaries are known to be partisan, biased and reflects ethnicity and religion in their preferences and actions. They therefore, assisted in correcting anomalies of state distribution and even in the integration of hitherto excluded and marginalised groups. The consequence of this was a reduction in the reasons for conflicts. The Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), Josemaria Escrivia, CEESF, were examples of some NSAs that took active part in the process of monitoring the distribution of palliatives.

Financial Donations: Donations came from faith based organisations (religious bodies), financial institutions, corporate bodies/organisations, NGOs, and individuals such as business magnates and politicians as part of the effort to assist government. This was done particularly because of the realisation that the state system was overwhelmed. As at April 18, 2020, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) confirmed that donations from 107 Nigerian companies, notable individual and organisations into the Nigeria COVID-19 Relief Fund had exceeded N25 billion (Benson, 2020).

Provision of Medics, Medical Kits and Others: In addition to other roles played by the NSAs, medics and medical kits such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other critical medical supplies mostly required by frontline health workers involved in the fight against the dreaded disease were provided. Ventilators, medically equipped ambulances to complement government effort, and hand sanitisers and face mask were donated and distributed in large quantity to citizens who could not afford them.

Provision of Palliatives to Vulnerable Groups: NSAs within the COVID-19 pandemic period assisted in responding to the needs of the vulnerable groups through the provision of palliatives. These were mostly food items and consumables. It was necessary to play this role because during the lockdown, food and consumables were required for citizens to survive. Though in some cases, they donated the palliatives to support government initiatives, beneficiaries of direct provision and distributions of other initiatives were mostly citizens that depended on daily earnings, the aged, women, children and the physically challenged.

Sought or Demanded Greater Responsibility, Transparency and Accountability: Part of the role of NSAs is to monitor governance, identify and bring to the knowledge of the state, issues and cases, that grieve and cause disaffection, divisions and agitation for the inclusiveness of deprived and hitherto excluded groups in the distribution of state resources and actions (Oyovbaire, 2001). In course of the pursuit of their responsibility, NSAs were able to seek greater responsibility, transparency and accountability from government functionaries. While tracking government regulations, infractions were noticed and attention drawn to them. For example, observations and remarks from the NSAs prompted the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 Pandemic to apologise publicly to Nigerians when it was observed that the laid down regulation on social distancing and wearing of face mask were flouted during the burial of the former Chief of Staff (COS) to the President – late Abba Kyari. In Abuja, the FRSC team that spotted an infraction and chased a woman with a kid in her car and were not civil in the handling of same were immediately withdrawn and made to face disciplinary action. The increase in the testing centers across the states and country were the result of the clamour by NSAs. Within the context of communication, they formed platforms where opinions were traded and moulded, while public policy and social actions were generated and influenced and same applicable to rules of public responsibility and appropriateness.

Public Enlightenment and Sensitisation: Awareness of the information regarding COVID-19 was important as part of the tools for curbing the spread of the disease. State institutions are limited in the dissemination of information in this regard. Therefore, the NSAs, provided platform where the citizens, particularly rural dwellers and the illiterates were educated and sensitised. While town criers were used in rural communities, churches and NGOs participated in this project of education and public enlightenment through the pulpits and leaflets respectively as the capacity of the government to reach the grass root was limited. Leaflets containing the meaning, spread, symptoms, preventive measures and inherent dangers in concealment were produced and distributed by them to assist in the sensitisation project. Within the context of communication, the NSAs provided platform for public education and mobilisation of the citizenry for the support of government approved health guidelines for curbing the spread of the pandemic and raising public awareness and information concerning the pandemic. These roles are vital to the perception and handling of issues in the pandemic, the behaviour of actors involved (citizens, health workers and governments), as well as the spread of the pandemic.

State Weaknesses and the Need for Alternative Intervention

At this stage it is important to examine the character of the state that created room for the paradigm shift. The argument here is that many of the interventions and responsibilities eventually carried out by the NSAs were supposed to be the responsibility of the state, but due to the factors highlighted below the NSAs had to intervene.

It is obvious that the capacity to handle the pandemic by government alone is limited and lacking in a fragile state such as Nigeria, hence, the need for complementary effort. Government agencies, facilities and interventions were easily overwhelmed by the pandemic due to inadequate finance, lack of preparedness and past neglect of public health infrastructures. Due to long neglect of the health sector by successive governments, the health facilities lacked the minimum requirement to face an emergency not to talk of a pandemic. At present, hospitals and medical

facilities in the country are not different from what Abacha in his coup address in 1983 (cited in Odion, 2009), described as mere ‘consulting clinics without drugs, water and equipment.’ The dilapidated state of the health infrastructure coupled with the under staffed situation was indicative of the inability to curtail the pandemic alone by the government. The federal government released \$2.7 million to support the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), and promised an additional \$18 million. However, this was a far cry from the estimated \$330 million required to tackle the disease in Nigeria. The above scenario coupled with crude oil price plummeting to as low as \$13 a barrel (with production cost around \$22) during critical period of the pandemic, culminating in dwindling revenue, the country’s finances unfortunately were seriously pressured. Therefore, the government must look in the direction of NSAs to make a difference.

Secondly, the state in Africa generally is a paradox (Ikelegbe, 2003). In spite of concentration of power, the over bloated size, its statist developmental strategy, its comprehensiveness and extensive regulatory agencies, the Nigerian state is still weak. It is in decline and decaying. The weakness is indicated by a weak and poorly developed capacity for government and economic management, poor and ineffective conduct of administration, ineffective control and command over resources, poor entrenchment and lack of broad recognition of state power, decline in the authority of state institutions, ‘weak fragmented political authority and weak government’ (Young & Thomas, 1987; Forrest, 1993, cited in Ikelegbe, 2003). Looting and non-adherence to the norms of integrity, good governance and political accountability have reduced the capacity of the state to deliver public good and meet the existential needs of the people (Ojo, 2018).

The state lacked the capacity to ensure that the palliatives that Nigerians hoped for, gets to the targeted vulnerable group. Many are already poverty ridden and deprived. The hope of the state coming to citizen’s rescue is further constrained with the state already contending with challenges such as, about 1.8 million people in internally displaced camps, the school children feeding programme, and another about 7 million in dire need of urgent life-saving assistance due to malnutrition and disease (NBS, 2019), government finances and infrastructures were certainly overwhelmed and overstretched. In the above circumstance, the best that government have done was “photo charity”– with much fanfare, drop of a few currency notes or grains here and there for some thousands when millions were actually in desperate need, just to be seen as doing something (Soludo, 2020). Furthermore, the state institutions, functionaries and agencies are inefficient, insensitive and non-responsive. The character is neither proactive nor prompt in its response to emergencies. When it does respond, it is a fire brigade type of response. Besides, exercise of power has been characterized by predation, widespread corruption and mismanagement, profligacy, “ethical collapse in many areas of public life,” politicisation and partisanship of central state institutions (Decalo, 1992, cited in Ikelegbe, 2003). The dominance of distributive demands of politics and policy, combined with personalisation of state resources and their disbursement, as well as clientelism and corruption, create enormous injustice and inequality that generate primordial and class conflict (Abutudu, 1995, cited in Ikelegbe, 2003). Corruption is endemic and has remained the most spectacular single factor that has retarded development process and prospect in Nigeria (Ojo, 2018).

Nigeria is not data driven. Data are very key to effective planning and there is evidence that the country is lacking reliable and credible data. Thus, effective planning and implementation

of programmes and policies is hampered. Credible demographic data to identify and target the most vulnerable were lacking. Thus, citizens are left to survive or perish so long they are either captured or not captured in the scanty data available to government. In this circumstance, NSAs had to provide sketchy data that government could rely on. The insufficiency of health personnel also posed a challenge. The total number of registered doctors according to the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) is 40,000. Whereas, the WHO recommendation of physician-to-patient ratio is 1:1000, in the Nigerian context, with an estimated population of about 200 million, it boils down to 1:2500 (Idowu, 2020). This called for intervention and volunteers in the form of NSAs.

Finally, there was the need to monitor government institutions that were reputed for renegeing on their promise to the citizens (particularly the vulnerable group) in all fronts. Issues affecting the citizens have never been at the front burner as policies of government were mostly skewed in favour of the elite and successive governments had failed in the past to deliver on their promises. A government that lacks legitimacy does not enjoy the support of its citizens, more so, when policies of government have not been inclusive and engendering development. Apparently, there is a yawning gap in trust and accountability between citizens and the state in Nigeria. Citizens were more likely to struggle for their own survival as, majority were alienated, and without stimulus package(s). The hungry and desperate millions were forced to take desperate actions to survive. This culminated in civil disobedience, open revolt and outright defiance in various parts of the country. NSAs intervened at this point as voluntary groups that the citizens could trust, acted as bridge between citizens and governments, possessing some level of autonomy and constituting platforms for harnessing citizens' effort and energies towards the overall good.

Challenges and New Realities

In the course of NSAs intervention, several challenges and realities were encountered. Among the challenges was insufficiency of the consumable/palliatives. It was obvious that the government lacked capacity to survive a lockdown or enforce stay at home. This measure required steady supply of food stuffs and consumables to citizens at home. Outside the general populace, evidence showed that the palliative could not assuage the hunger that was prevalent among the vulnerable groups; hence, they attacked storage facilities where such palliatives were kept.

Another major challenge was identification of the poorest of the poor, particularly in rural communities when there was lack of data. This made some individuals to benefit while others were left out. Whereas palliatives in the form of cash were given to people in the North, the argument in the case of South was that people were not captured in the sketchy data available, thus leaving a huge gap between Nigerian that benefited and those that did not. Penetrating rural communities were difficult due sometimes to the terrain. Besides, logistics to cover rural areas where many people actually resided were absent and where provided (in some cases by Local councils) were inadequate. Diversion of palliatives was also a noticeable challenge. Even where these palliatives were not enough, attempts were still made to divert some of the items by government officials. In addition, it was obvious that the provision and distribution of palliatives was not sustainable because of the dwindling revenue at the disposal of governments. Therefore, going beyond certain limits apparently was impossible, hence, the gradual ease of the lockdown and interstate movement.

Infractions and violation of fundamental rights were noticeable challenges. In course of the implementation of government directives on stay at home and lockdown, rights of citizens were violated. For example, journalist and other workers in the frontline were intimidated and harassed and subjected to inhuman treatment. The Nigeria National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) had reported that security services enforcing the lockdown, extra judicially killed 18 people (Donnelly & Hassan, 2020). On the other hand, one of the reality of the COVID-19 was that there was debilitating poor coordination, lack of accountability, few incentives to improve performance as well as lack of resources at the frontline often traced back to corruption and Nigeria's competitive clientelist political settlement (Watt, 2018 cited in Cummings, 2020). Very low expenditure on public health and a near failed health care system reflected heavily in the dilapidated infrastructures meant to manage the pandemic. But the pandemic changed the face of some of the health infrastructures with the massive provision of some basic equipment such as testing machine, reagents, personal protective equipment, ventilators, beds, ambulances, etc.

Another 'new reality' was that unfortunately, due to restrictions on international travels, the rich and government functionaries could not escape. The rush for medical tourism was completely absent as the rich, government official and families who hitherto treated government facilities with disdain could no longer seek medical attention abroad. Thus the elites had to subject themselves and depend on the domestic health facilities that had been abandoned by successive governments for the poor and with a legacy of underfunding. They could not escape poor sanitation, densely populated cities, large and vulnerable informal economies and weak public health (Cumming, 2020). They could also not avoid criminality such as armed robbery, rape and kidnapping. This refocused the attention of the elites to support security and public health infrastructures with donations. Oneness of mankind played out during the pandemic. It reflected in the sharing of information about the pandemic, formation of synergies and humanitarian gesture in form of charities and donations by individuals. Those that had enough in the neighborhood voluntarily shared with the less privileged in the neighbourhood. The consciousness that the pandemic does not exempt anybody propelled privileged individuals and corporate organisations to render assistance. The idea behind this was the conclusion that the virus was a common enemy that must be curtailed by all concern. Again, ignoring the large poor population could spell doom for the rich. No doubt past epidemics have shown us that the poor usually suffer and are ready victims much more than the elite because the rich has access to good food, nutrition and sometimes strong immunity to resist the plague. To avoid the revolution of the poor and to curtail the spread of the virus, palliatives and other gestures had to be provided even to the neighborhood.

COVID-19 brought the increased use of videoconferencing and teleconferencing. This reflected in the increased willingness to do meetings and discussions such as Federal Executive Council (FEC), Nigerian Governors Forum (NGF), Council of States digitally or over telephone. Nigeria participated in the China-Africa Summit held in June 2020, through videoconferencing. Projects such as the Ajaokuta-Kaduna-Kano (AKK) gas pipeline were also commissioned digitally and devoid of the usual fun fare and profligacy often embarked on by government and its functionaries. These were previously done on face-to-face basis. The implication of this is a reduction in travel and logistical costs. Flowing from above is the issue of reduction in cost of governance. Government policy of stay at home and lockdowns were restrictive and so limited many activities. High cost of governance reflected in the total cost of financing government

structure such as travel allowances, fueling retinue of staff, and accommodation cost has been worrisome. This cost is high in Nigeria because of the attitude of Nigerian politicians and governing elite that saw their involvement in politics and governance as a means of self-aggrandisement rather than service. Ojo (2018) had argued that high cost of governance has greatly militated against the ability of government in Nigeria to meet with the expectation of delivering on wellbeing of the people and development of society, to provide basic infrastructure, social services and facilities needed by the people. This position is corroborated by Peter Obi while speaking at the World Bank Youth Forum (cited in Ojo, 2018), that if leaders were able to reduce the money they spend on unnecessary things such as staying at the costliest hotels when they travel, keeping many guest houses, chartering planes when not absolutely necessary, engaging in epicurean life and other indulgences, they will have money to do the necessary things.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The researchers essentially investigated the NSAs intervention in the COVID-19 pandemic and identified individuals (business magnates and politicians), faith based organisations, financial institutions, corporate bodies and NGOs as the NSAs that participated. The nature of their intervention was essentially collaborative and complementary. It took the form of provision of properties for isolation purposes, monitoring of the distribution of palliatives, financial donations, provision of palliatives to vulnerable groups, as well as public enlightenment and sensitisation amongst others. The findings revealed that NSAs can adapt and provide critical response in a pandemic. Though their roles were basically complementary in most cases, it was observed that the character of the state and its weakness in terms of capacity actually necessitated the paradigm shift for alternative intervention. Thus, it was recommended that the culture of unity, brotherhood and oneness displayed by all segments in the Nigerian society be sustained. This can normally be achieved if the citizens have confidence in government and its agents. This means that governments, its agents and functionaries must act in a transparent and accountable manner. Observance of transparency rules in governance often help in eliminating suspicion and mobilising support for government.

Credible and reliable data bank is required in the country. It is lacking in Nigeria, but necessary for planning purposes. As a result, response and intervention of government to situations such as the pandemic is often minimal where available. Finally, it is also recommended that NSAs be encouraged by government to do more for the citizen particularly in times of emergencies. This can start by the creation of the awareness of the role that they can possibly play in an emergency situation.

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