Pursuit of an Ideal Nigerian Society in the Post-Covid-19 Era

By Nnamdi Ohachenu
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Introduction

Early ideologies that birthed socialism began with great minds like Henri de Saint Simon, and morphed through the inputs of the likes of Karl Marx who was the proponent of Marxism, otherwise known as modern socialism. These ideologies point to the utopic idea of what society should be like. A significant level of fairness, class equality and the deconstruction of social stratification were canvassed for. Realists however argued that these are unattainable and ambiguous to say the least. However, humanity set up the ideals despite the obvious conflict between normative expectations and actual reality. People float through these social constructs, institutions and over time get introspective, consequently leading to reactions and responses to these humanly devised constraints. Humans naturally are wired to be dynamic, hence the zigzag motions that thrive in society. Sometimes it becomes more than just a simple change. It becomes a movement that causes a great domino effect which could either be good or bad. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, a new era was launched; an era where survival became great luxury, an era where an awakening began and many realised how other spheres of life other than health, could be better.

In the wake of the pandemic, I published an article on “Budget Facility and Economic Security in the Face of Economic Shocks” (using the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study) (Ohachenu, 2020).

The intent of that work was to reiterate the need for a decent level of preparedness on the part of government and polity against plausible shocks such as the pandemic. The article gave an exposé on the recurrent underfinancing of the Nigerian health sector, and the ubiquitous nature of the negligence of government when it comes to other vital sectors like education that cause growth and development. However, this article also presented an opportunity to explore other socioeconomic issues that exist and were magnified by the pandemic; issues that come up in an attempt at an ideal Nigeria in a world where Coronavirus exists.

There have been many conspiracy theories following the pandemic; narratives and counter-narratives between the government and the populace. The Afrocentric perspective of the average Nigerian man as regards the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly influenced how the situation is being micromanaged. Also, like many economies, several sectors in the Nigerian economy suffered. However, the main exception was the financial market which on the contrary experienced significant growth since the pandemic started (Eyitope & Mayowa, 2020). It begs the question, why? Why does this outlier exist? Social movements like the End SARS movement seemed to ensue just about same time as the pandemic. Many still do not believe that the pandemic had in anyway influenced the movement and protests.

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1 End SARS is a national social movement against police brutality and violation of human rights in Nigeria. The movement calls for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad group notable for abuse of power.

Photo by Daniel Nupodeyon-unsplash
However, it can be argued that there is a correlation between both situations to establish causal effect and that it is not necessarily a coincidence. Other issues include the shift in learning method to ensure continuity of education.

The intent of this paper is to examine the social dynamics following the pandemic in the Nigerian society. The paper explores the response to the pandemic, efforts towards stabilising the economy and society, the uniqueness of each event, the causative agents and the impact of change in the society. While the paper is not exhaustive in highlighting social dynamics, it studies few notable events surrounding the pandemic. It is important to analyse just how much the pandemic has changed social customs and lifestyle both in micro and macro level. This allows a trend analysis that facilitates planning in the course of restructuring the economy and society.

I. Conspiracy Theories (Narratives And Counter-Narratives)

The media is a powerful tool that can influence the mindset of many. Every headline featured on news outlets since COVID-19 have had several narratives. The power of grapevine rumors can also not be downplayed as many are quick to jump on certain stories they hear; each with its own uniqueness and advocates. The first narrative that became widespread was the idea that the Chinese government and higher powers of the world had intentionally unleashed the virus with the aim of controlling world population.

This story was supported with excerpts from old publications including the speech made by the former US president, President Donald Trump, who overtly blamed China and the World Health Organization (WHO) for the global pandemic at the United Nations General Assembly last year (Neuman, 2020). The news progressed to religious leaders and other radical groups stating that the 5G technology was the cause of the coronavirus. The biggest controversy had been caused by Christ Embassy pastor Chris Oyakhilome, who in a viral video blamed the 5G network for the spread of the virus (BBC News, Lagos, 2020).

Over time there have been a salient conflict of beliefs between the government and the people. The public media are intent on making sure that the public is sensitised about the threat posed by the Coronavirus. However many Nigerians believed and still believe that the news and statistics of COVID-19 cases in Nigeria is a plot by the government to instill fear in the people and exploit the situation by receiving foreign aid from international organisations. This clearly points to the distrust of the masses where the government
is concerned in handling social welfare. This has made the implementation of COVID-19 safety protocols a herculean task and people still gather in masses without the use of face masks or hand sanitizers. It is also unfortunate that the government is also not observing the protocols as political rallies and other state functions are ongoing.

There have also been much controversy and hesitancy surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine. In an article published by WHO which discusses Nigerian health workers’ experience with the first COVID-19 vaccine, Dr. Shuaib stated, “We are not ruling out some vaccine hesitancy from the public, but we are putting measures to educate and sensitize the citizens that the COVID-19 vaccine is safe and efficacious” (WHO, 2021). The disruptive effects of these conspiracy theories seem to be more palpable with groups with low literacy rate. However, with the introduction of the vaccines in March, 2021, there are plausible hiccups due to these conspiracy theories across both literate and illiterate members of the public.

II. Growth of Financial Market

The financial institutions sub-sector reported a GDP growth rate of 28.1% despite a 6.1% contraction in gross domestic product (GDP) (Research Team, 2020). I was once asked to attempt explaining why the Nigerian financial market seemed to be immune to the harsh effects of the pandemic across many sectors of the economy. A simple analogy comes to mind based on normative expectations. The COVID-19 shock was both supply side and demand side in nature. The lockdown caused a shift in consumption pattern as people had less access to goods and services, thereby reducing the market value of goods and services (gross domestic product-GDP). On the supply side, factories and firms were temporarily shut down and workers were laid off as well. Also, cost of production increased which made businesses a lot more capital intensive.

With the high inflation in the economy and reduced GDP, business owners were trading financial instruments to raise capital to offset the increase in cost of production. On the other hand, individuals were trading their financial securities to manage subsistent living. This consequently increases the value of financial instruments and quantitatively leads to growth of the market. This could explain why the financial market seem to be growing.

III. End SARS Movement

There is an argument that the End SARS movement was independent on the pandemic. While it is not certain as to whether or not the pandemic really did influence the movement, the power of cause and effect still stands. The advent of the pandemic caused a very high rate of unemployment and social instability. According to the National Bureau of Statistics’ (NBS) Labour Force Survey, Nigeria’s unemployment rate was 27% in Q2 2020. This is four percentage points higher than the 23% reported in Q3 2018 (PricewaterhouseCoopers Limited, 2020). In Q4 2020, Nigeria’s unemployment rate increased to 33.3% (Proshare Nigeria, 2021). Many could not afford the kind of lifestyle they were accustomed to and as such were dealing with the lack of utility. When things are not as they should be, the human mind goes through the following stages; disappointment, frustration, anger, rage and eventually indifference.
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Cheney Coker’s “Myopia” clearly depicts the plausible effect of an unstable economy which is the uprising by masses in protest against the unfavourable conditions. The significant level of police brutality that had been ongoing before the pandemic, also pointed to a threat to health and stability. During the protest, it was common to hear, “since I don lose my job, make I dey protest”. The pandemic gave people time for a lot more introspection. They saw the capabilities (or lack thereof) of the government (Amaji, 2021). The End SARS served as a platform to channel that anger into fighting for something good for the Nigerian society.

Since the dust on the End SARS protest settled, the average Nigerian youth is a lot more vocal about other deplorable conditions of the country and is not afraid to engage in the cancel culture commonly used on social media platforms to call out social injustice and its perpetrators. The End SARS protest set the pace for the Bring Back Our Girls movement which was pioneered by Mrs. Oby Ezekwesili, and other campaigns canvassing for the rescue of abducted students in the Northern parts of Nigeria. The attention score on issues like this are a lot higher than it was before the pandemic, before the End SARS protest.

IV. E-learning

With the lockdown halting education and leaving students/pupils at home, the shift to the use of e-learning method had to be implemented. E-learning method is not a new method of learning in Nigerian schools. However, the effort on capitalising on technological advancement for education was relatively lower in Nigerian public schools until recently. Nigerian private universities like Covenant University were using e-learning teaching methods but most public schools and some private universities had to organise a training seminar to teach lecturers and students how to use platforms like Zoom, etc. Students were required to take computer-based tests for their assessments. It did stir quite a shock and several complaints were received from both student bodies and teaching bodies; all expressing their distaste for the e-learning method. However since the reopening of schools and classroom settings in Nigeria, the e-learning method of learning is still a fad and will very likely continue to be used. The shift has propagated the importance of technology especially in a very dynamic world, and this would not have gained as much magnitude if the pandemic hadn’t caused the lockdown.
V. Towards an Ideal Nigerian Society

The Nigerian society continues to struggle with many social vices that the prospect of an ideal society seems very unlikely. However, it remains a focal point for not just the people, but also the government. This is a society plagued with bureaucracy, red tape, economic dualism, corruption, indiscriminate import of goods and services, low ease of doing business index, high unemployment rate, and so many other vices. The pandemic could have easily been the Achilles heel that ultimately destabilises the economy for good, as the situation prior was abysmal. However, there is a chance to remedy the situation and the pandemic has made it imperative to do so.

The recent events from the pandemic reiterate the need for a social reform. This reform is expected to reshape the mindset and attitude of every Nigerian; one where checks and balances begin with one’s self then to a macro level. Building an ideal society may not be a 100% attainable but a close replica is very much attainable. The institutions must be effectual, and not merely serve as an accessory of state designed to offer moonshine appearances.

The government officials and public office holders are required to be worthy of the offices they hold by fully meeting the standards for the position they occupy. Proper policy implementation is necessary for any economy to grow. Also, the attention score of government in key sectors like; health, education, research and development, must be relatively higher than that of other sectors. According to Amartya Sen, development is measured by the capability to function and these sectors guarantee that by building human capital.

The private sector must optimally bridge the gap created by the public sector in ensuring efficiency. Also, a structure where corporate social responsibility is prioritised should be put in place. The culture of pure capitalism has to be discarded and replaced with a healthy balance of social welfare and profit maximisation.

Finally, the family as the microcosm of the society is responsible for producing functional members of the society. Every family should aspire to train its members and prepare them to not be liabilities but assets to the society. This reduces the chances of social instability caused by crimes and sharp practices. The change agents come from families and with the right opportunities serve not just family but the world. If every Nigerian can inculcate the right values in its members then the chances of building an ideal Nigerian society will be a lot higher.

Conclusion

While the pandemic has had a devastating effect on several economies of the world including that of Nigeria, there seems to be an upside to all of it. It seems the world is in a form of neo-renaissance era where government and polity are awakened and are a lot more invested in working towards securing the future than before. In economies where apathy thrived, the masses are a lot more interested in knowing what the government does in dealing with the threat because it is very inclusive. There have always been measures put in place in building an ideal society in several parts of the world but there is something different about the effort being put in this time. In the case of Nigeria, there is less tolerance for social injustice, an easy method of government administration appraisal based on the crisis management is in place; which should ensure effectual strategies. While the Nigerian economy is far from ideal, it seems that this new era could cause a paradigm shift and we’d have the global threat to health to thank for that.
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