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Impact of Fuel Subsidy Removal and the People's Well-Being in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract
The study examined the impact of fuel subsidy removal on the people's well-being in Calabar Metropolis. Thus, specifically, the study aims to find out the reasons for fuel subsidy removal and to investigate the economic effect of the fuel subsidy removal on the people's well-being in Calabar Metropolis. The structural functionalism theory was selected and utilized in this study. This study adopts a qualitative research method, and in-depth interviews were used for data collection using traders, students, and academic staff from the University of Calabar, artisans, political stakeholders, and commercial drivers. The ten (10) key in-depth interviews were purposefully selected using the snowball sampling method. Two themes were developed, and thematic data analysis was adopted. The results indicate that the elimination of fuel subsidies was driven by factors such as addressing corruption, fostering growth in crucial national development sectors, and supporting the growth of domestic refineries. The research findings underscore that the removal of fuel subsidies has had significant repercussions on people's well-being, primarily in the form of increased transportation costs and higher prices of essential food items. Consequently, the study concludes that poverty remains a prevalent issue in Nigeria. While in the long term, this move is expected to benefit the economy by reallocating resources to sectors like agriculture, education, and healthcare, its negative effects are particularly pronounced in the absence of government-implemented relief measures to mitigate the impact on citizens. It was recommended, among others, that the government should establish social safety nets and targeted welfare programmes to support vulnerable and low-income households. These programmes can include cash transfers, food assistance, and subsidies on essential goods for the most affected individuals and families. Also, the government should invest in public transportation by allocating resources to improve and expand public transportation systems. This will provide an alternative to private vehicle usage, reducing the overall burden of increased fuel prices.
Keywords: *Fuel, Subsidy Removal, Well-being, Sustainable Development, Nigeria*

Introduction

Since the return of democracy in 1999, Nigeria, the second-largest oil producer in Africa, has grappled with a contentious fuel subsidy system. Initially introduced as a temporary six-month measure to stabilise petroleum prices during the refurbishment of local refineries, this policy has endured for many years, withstanding a brief period of removal. These subsidies have had a dual impact, offering relief to numerous citizens while also fostering corruption and economic inertia.

Historically, fuel subsidies in Nigeria have been perceived as one of the few advantages citizens receive from the government, especially in light of the inconsistent and unreliable electricity supply in the country. The removal of these subsidies would result in a significant portion of an individual's daily budget being allocated to cover the soaring cost of gasoline, which would, in turn, force many to heavily rely on gasoline generators. However, it is worth noting that these subsidies have placed a considerable economic burden on Nigeria, with an estimated cost of \$10 billion annually as of 2022 (Falana & Ojo, 2023).

The subsidy system has faced criticism over the years. In 2012, when subsidies were first removed, petrol prices surged, leading to widespread protests and strikes. In response, the government reduced fuel costs by 30 percent, but this was seen as a temporary solution to an ongoing issue. Subsequently, in 2016, as global oil prices declined, subsidies were once again eliminated due to concerns about the sustainability of the practice and the rampant corruption in subsidy payments.

Nonetheless, despite the turbulent events surrounding fuel subsidies, the case for their elimination remains strong. These subsidies are financially unsustainable and worsen Nigeria's fiscal challenges, a concern shared by the World Bank. Furthermore, they encourage excessive fuel consumption, divert resources away from more productive sectors, contribute to pollution and global warming, and exacerbate inequality by primarily benefiting wealthier households that consume larger quantities of fuel (Ebingha et al 2019, Falana & Ojo, 2023).

Under the new leadership of President Bola Tinubu, who assumed office on May 29, 2023, the imperative to eliminate subsidies has gained even greater urgency. The preceding administration had postponed the deadline for subsidy removal until June 2023. Nevertheless, President Tinubu exhibits unwavering determination to bring an end to the subsidy system, triggering concerns about the potential rise in fuel and transportation costs, which, in turn, could place an added burden on the working class. As per Yemi et al. (2023), the elimination of subsidies on Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) fuel is anticipated to result in a temporary increase in inflation, which currently stands at 22.22% as of April 2023. The World Bank anticipates that this one-time adjustment will lead to elevated inflation in 2023 and 2024, followed by a subsequent decline. Yemi et al.'s (2023) internal macroeconomic model also aligns with the findings of the World Bank, projecting an approximate 6% increase over the June 2023 inflation rate, bringing it to around 30% (Ukwayi & Okpa, 2017).

In a similar vein, Taiwo and Ayo (2023) propose that the elimination of petrol subsidies is poised to result in an upsurge in pump prices, with immediate consequences manifesting in elevated transportation costs. Furthermore, the indirect ramifications may extend to augmented rental rates and increased prices of commodities and services (Omang et al, 2022). Notably, this brunt is anticipated to be most acutely experienced by the financially challenged urban workforce, specifically those earning meagre wages and reliant on daily commutes for employment. Consequently, it is imperative that government relief efforts primarily target this socio-economic demographic.

However, it is important to underscore that the prospective benefits of subsidy removal far outweigh the existing challenges (Odinka et al, 2023). The substantial savings realised from this action could be strategically channelled into critical sectors such as education, technology, infrastructure development, and the provision of subsidised agricultural inputs. These investments have the potential to generate significantly greater returns for Nigeria compared to the current squandering of resources on a petroleum subsidy system tainted by corruption. Therefore, the principal objective of this study is to scrutinise the consequences of fuel subsidy removal on the well-being of the populace in Calabar Metropolis. Specifically, this research seeks to elucidate the rationale behind subsidy removal and establish the connection between its discontinuation and its impact on the well-being of the people in Calabar Metropolis.

Theoretical framework

This study is rooted in the framework of structural functionalism, a sociological perspective that traces its origins back to early scholars such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Emile Durkheim. Central to functionalism, often referred to as structural functionalism, is the concept of the "organismic analogy," which envisions society as a cohesive whole. The primary focus of this sociological approach is on the overarching social structures and institutions within society, examining their interconnectedness and the impact they exert on individuals. Durkheim, a prominent figure in the development of functionalism, articulated several key assumptions for understanding society.

Society is viewed as an independent entity, distinct from and not reducible to its constituent parts, the various components of society serve to fulfil the fundamental needs and requisites of the whole, fulfilling these basic societal needs is essential to preventing "abnormal" states and societies tend to maintain equilibrium states in which normal functioning occurs. Durkheim also laid down guiding principles for the explanation of social phenomena, emphasising the need to separately identify the efficient cause producing a phenomenon and the function it serves. Furthermore, he stressed that the function of a social fact is inherently social, necessitating an exploration of its relationship to some societal purpose or end.

Martindale (1965) defines function as the activity that both shapes and sustains a system, encompassing the positive and negative consequences of social institutions and processes. Marion (1952) offers an alternative definition, characterising function as the resultant condition or state stemming from the continuous operation of a structure over time. He introduces the concept of 'eufunction' to describe favourable outcomes contributing to the continuity and well-being of a social system, while 'dysfunction' denotes adverse consequences leading to system breakdown.

In the context of the Nigerian political system, the theory holds significance as various structures have been established with the responsibility of delivering essential services to citizens at affordable rates (Okpa et al, 2020). While political structures are multifaceted, some are particularly tailored for specific functions. Notably, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and the Ministry of Petroleum, often overseen by the President, have faltered in their duty to maintain existing refineries and establish new ones. This shortcoming has culminated in the removal of fuel subsidies, resulting in elevated transport costs and increased living expenses, especially in Calabar Metropolis.

Despite the theory's utility, it has faced criticism, primarily concerning its methodological approach within functionalism. The approach involves deducing a list of functions and subsequently identifying the relevant structures, occasionally leading to empirical distortions to conform to the framework. Such criticism, however, tends to place the responsibility for research validity on the researcher rather than the approach itself. Additionally, the theory has been faulted for its inability to accommodate social change and individual agency.

Literature review

In Omotosho's 2019 research, the focus was on analysing the interplay of oil price shocks, fuel subsidies, and their effects on macroeconomic stability in Nigeria. The study involved the development and estimation of a New-Keynesian DSGE model that incorporated the pass-through effect of international oil price fluctuations into the retail fuel price. The findings of the study demonstrated that oil price shocks have substantial and enduring impacts on the country's economic output, accounting for approximately 22% of its variations over a four-year period.

In the baseline model (with fuel subsidies), the research also revealed that a negative oil price shock results in a contraction of the aggregate GDP, a boost in non-oil GDP, an increase in headline inflation, and a depreciation of the exchange rate. However, when the model was run without fuel subsidies, it indicated that the contractionary effect of a negative oil price shock on aggregate GDP was mitigated. Furthermore, headline inflation decreased, but the exchange rate depreciated more in the short term. Counterfactual simulations demonstrated that the removal of fuel subsidies led to heightened macroeconomic instabilities and had noteworthy implications for how monetary policy responded to an oil price shock (Omang et al, 2020; Okoi et al, 2022).

Soile et al., 2014 study, on the other hand, investigated the consequences of subsidy removal on the development of the transport sector in Nigeria, utilising co-integration and error-correction models. The results of their research showed that subsidies had a positive and substantial correlation with the transport sector. This suggests that eliminating gasoline subsidies can lead to an increase in the operational costs of the transportation sector and a reduction in the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

In the year 2023, Onuoha conducted a study investigating the discourse surrounding the removal of fuel subsidies and its impacts on the Nigerian economy. The research revealed a surge in transportation costs, a steep increase in food prices, and a corresponding upswing in the prices of other essential commodities. Simultaneously, the study observed that certain households lacking a substantial source of income experienced stagnation in their financial situations. Consequently, this situation contributed to a decline in the overall income of impoverished families, thereby intensifying the levels of poverty within the nation. Consequently, this exacerbation of poverty further compounded the already distressing economic hardships experienced by the population, leading to a continued struggle to maintain even a basic standard of living.

Method

This research study utilised a qualitative research design, in alignment with the perspective of Clark and Creswell (2015). Qualitative research designs encompass a series of methodologies aimed at collecting, analysing, and presenting data in the form of text or imagery to address research questions by delving into the perspectives of key informants (Okpa, 2022; Anam et al, 2022). The decision to employ qualitative research to investigate the issue at hand holds immense significance for several compelling reasons. First and foremost, this approach allows the researcher to tap into the insights of individuals who have directly experienced the consequences of fuel subsidy removal (Peter et al, 2020). Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that a substantial portion of the population in Calabar Metropolis may not possess proficient reading and writing skills. Consequently, the most appropriate avenue for acquiring comprehensive data from these key informants in their native languages is through the utilisation of qualitative research methods.

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study, where a sample size of ten (10) participants was selected for in-depth interviews. The participants were drawn from diverse backgrounds, including taxi drivers, traders, artisans, students, family households, and academics with expertise in economic policies and people's well-being. The principle of saturation was utilised to guide the determination of the sample size, a common concern among qualitative researchers. Saturation, as recommended by scholars like Mason (2010), Bernard (2011), and Draper et al. 2012), is considered the most widely accepted method for establishing sample size in qualitative research. Saturation is defined as the point at which collected data ceases to yield new or additional insights beyond what was initially discovered (Draper et al., 2012). Therefore, this study relied on the saturation principle to determine the number of informants to be included in the research.

The participants in this study were purposefully chosen because the research aimed to identify and select individuals or groups with specialised knowledge about a specific phenomenon of interest. To enhance the participant selection process, we employed a combination of the snowball sampling strategy and broader purposive sampling techniques.

Snowball sampling, a subset of purposive sampling, involved asking initial participants to recommend others who were eligible for interviews (Creswell, 2012). This approach was particularly valuable due to the complex and relatively limited understanding of the phenomenon being studied. As a result, the identification of suitable participants led to the emergence of additional participants within the Calabar Metropolis, where the research was conducted. However, it's important to note that rigorous efforts were made to ensure that the subsequent recommendations of participants did not introduce biases into the selection process.

The initial group of participants purposely identified for inclusion consisted of academic professionals and political stakeholders who met the selection criteria. These individuals were then asked to suggest additional participants from their respective domains who were best suited to provide insights into the research questions. Additionally, interviews were conducted with taxi drivers, traders, artisans, and students in the Calabar Metropolis, who served as gatekeepers and helped identify other informants. The selection of experts for interviews was a careful process, considering their research interests and qualifications relevant to the study's objectives.

This study drew upon a manifold array of data sources. As outlined by Creswell (2014; 2012) and Merriam (2009), these sources encompass observations, interviews, and document analysis. In alignment with the research objectives, these sources were strategically employed to address the research inquiries. The selection of this qualitative research approach necessitated the acquisition of primary data, primarily through in-depth interviews and observations, as these methods were deemed most apt for obtaining reliable data that comprehensively encapsulates the breadth of information required to achieve the study's goals. These data collection techniques were specifically tailored to encompass a diverse cross-section of the affected population, including traders, students, taxi drivers, artisans, and academic experts. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive and authentic perspective on the impact of fuel subsidy removal on the well-being of individuals within the study area. The study's findings are presented as themes, sub-themes, and explanatory accounts that cut across the entire dataset.

Results

The word frequency is used to identify the most carefully selected words during the conduct of a research as well as generating themes and sub-themes. This shows the central focus of the responses on the subject matter of the study. Thus, the sub-themes were generated in the Table 1 &2 below.

Table 1: Summary of the Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Informants
Reasons for fuel subsidy removal	It will stop corruption	4
	It will pave way for enhanced growth in critical sectors of national development	2
	It will help in the growth of domestic refineries	4
Effects of fuel subsidy removal on the people well-being	Transport fare	5
	Economy	5

Table 2: The In-depth Interview Informants and the Coding

S/N	Informants	Brief Bio-Data	Code
1.	Cyber-cafe owner at Unical small gate	Male 43 years, SSCE	R1
2.	A hairstylist	Female 26 years, SSCE	R2
3.	Foodstuff seller	Female 31 years, FLSC	R3
4.	A civil servant who owns a shop	Female 42 years, B.SC	R4
5.	A barber	Male 23 years, SSCE	R5
6.	Student	Male 20 years, University of Calabar undergraduate	R6
7.	An economist at University of Calabar	Male 44 years Ph.D	R7
8.	A political stakeholder	Male 51 years, M.Sc	R8
9.	A taxi driver	Male 23 years, No formal education	R9
10.	A social analyst	Male 48 years, Ph.D	R10

Reasons for fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria

Fuel subsidies represent a governmental approach aimed at diminishing the cost of fuel by providing direct financial assistance to oil companies. Consequently, these subsidies make fuel more affordable for consumers, particularly Nigerians. Nigeria, a prominent crude oil producer in Africa, heavily relies on this resource for its economic advancement. During interviews conducted in Calabar Metropolis, Nigeria, several key informants concurred that:

Eliminating fuel subsidies would unlock resources that could be allocated to various other sectors of the economy. The government currently allocates a significant portion of its budget to fuel subsidies, funds that could be better utilised in areas such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure development, among other critical sectors.

> The establishment of domestic refineries for increased petroleum product production would reduce Nigeria's reliance on imported fuel. This move not only enhances energy security but also stimulates economic growth. The availability of domestic refineries has the potential to catalyse economic growth and generate a substantial number of job opportunities for the Nigerian population (in-depth interview with R8).

It is noteworthy to highlight that previous government investigations and numerous legal disputes over petroleum subsidies have uncovered extensive corruption involving both government officials and private actors within the petroleum industry. Consequently, the elimination of fuel subsidies is imperative for ensuring energy security and fostering economic growth. This conclusion is reinforced by the findings of the Petroleum Revenue Special Task Force Report, led by Mallam Ribadu, which revealed that NNPC withheld N1.983 trillion in subsidies between 2006 and 2011, constituting nearly 40 percent of the 2016 national budget.

Furthermore, the House of Representatives Ad hoc Committee on Subsidy Verification, chaired by Farouk M. Lawal, concluded that the subsidy system in operation from 2009 to 2011 was riddled with massive corruption and inefficiency. The claims for subsidies did not correspond to actual fuel consumption. In contrast to the initial official subsidy payment figure of N1.3 trillion, the Accountant General of the Federation presented a sum of N1.6 trillion, the Central Bank of Nigeria reported N1.7 trillion, and the committee determined that subsidy payments reached N2,587.087 trillion by December 31, 2011, exceeding the allocated amount by over 900 percent (N245 billion).

Similarly, Haiara's research in 2023 corroborates these findings, revealing that the total expenditure on subsidies from 2005 to 2021 is equivalent to the combined budgets for health, education, agriculture, and defence over the past five years. This sum also matches the capital expenditure for the entire decade from 2011 to 2020. Notably, subsidy payments peaked in 2011 at \$13.52 billion, or N2.11 trillion. The removal of subsidies would unlock resources that can be redirected towards essential infrastructure projects such as roads, education, healthcare, power generation, and security, thereby fostering job creation and bolstering the growth of our GDP. It would also help combat fuel theft, pipeline vandalism, environmental pollution, and foreign exchange shortages and enhance the provision of fundamental services for the less privileged members of society.

Impact of fuel subsidy removal on the people well-being

Ever since President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's announcement of the fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria, there has been a surge of comments, thoughts, and insights from both professionals and everyday citizens regarding its impact. Small business owners, in particular, have expressed their concerns about the adverse effects of rising costs of goods and services on their livelihoods.

One café owner, in an in-depth interview, shared his distress, stating,"

> This café is my sole means of supporting my family. After increasing photocopying prices due to the surge in petrol costs, I now charge N30, which is 50 percent more than the previous N20. Despite this, I barely make a quarter of what I used to earn in a day before the fuel subsidy removal. It's incredibly frustrating, and I may have to consider closing down soon (in-depth interview with R1).

Likewise, hairstylist has found herself compelled to raise her service prices, but despite these increases, her business is still suffering. According to an informant,

> Washing and relaxing hair, which used to cost N1,000 before the subsidy removal, has now surged to N1,500. Presently, I can't even cover the fuel costs for my generator. I hardly use electrical hair equipment anymore. I can only hope for a change soon, as I've lost more customers in the past week than I have in my entire six years as a hairdresser (in-depth interview with R2).

When asked about the fuel subsidy's impact on people's well-being, the participant added,

> Running my shop has become increasingly challenging. Purchasing foodstuffs from markets like Marian and Bleach has become exorbitant. A bus ride to Akim used to cost N200, but now it's N700. Returning with my goods, I'm forced to pay as much as N1,500 instead of N500 due to rising transportation costs that have driven up food prices. To make ends meet, I've had to distribute these transportation expenses across all my goods. A small bowl of garri, previously sold for N800, now goes for N1,500. Customers are buying smaller quantities, significantly affecting my purchasing power (in-depth interview with R3).

A civil servant who also owns a shop voiced a similar sentiment, stating,

> Since the fuel subsidy removal, sales at my shop have dwindled significantly. Customer turnout has decreased, and most days, the income barely covers my transportation expenses to and from work. Affording three square meals has become a challenge (in-depth interview with R4).

Another individual, a barber, shared his own grievances and expressed a wish for the government to reinstate the petrol subsidy, saying,

> In my ten years as a barber, I have never encountered this level of hardship. I hope the government can reverse its decision on the subsidy removal. I now find myself relying on Garri for sustenance, three times a day (in-depth interview with R5).

Since the subsidy removal, fuel prices have continued to climb, starting at N197 and reaching N540, and now N617. Consequently, public transportation fares have risen in various parts of the country, affecting even students at the University of Calabar. A shuttle bus ride within the university, once priced at N20, now costs N70. David John, who resides off-campus, shared the extent of his struggle, stating,

> In an attempt to save funds for basic necessities, I've had to skip some classes. This has impacted my class attendance as I must cut down on transportation expenses (in-depth interview with R6).
> According to an economist from the University of Calabar, the removal of the fuel subsidy could potentially place an overwhelming burden on the economy. This economist further explained that while the long-term benefits, such as reallocating resources to sectors like agriculture, education, and healthcare, are promising, the suddenness of this move is causing significant distress. Notably, the government has not yet introduced any relief measures to alleviate the impact on citizens, especially those in vulnerable situations (In-depth interview with R7).

In response to the impending fuel shortage crisis in Nigeria, resulting from the government's subsidy removal, a social analyst voiced concerns. The decision by President Bola Tinubu to eliminate the fuel subsidy has left millions of Nigerians apprehensive about its far-reaching consequences for their daily lives. Many fear their ability to afford education, food, and healthcare will be compromised. Additionally, the government has yet to propose any strategies to ease the burden on low-income individuals. While all nations are ultimately obligated to phase out fossil fuel subsidies as part of their human rights commitments in the context of the climate crisis, this should not be done in a manner that jeopardises the ability of disadvantaged individuals to maintain an acceptable standard of living. Hence, it is imperative that the subsidy's removal be accompanied by social support and protective measures (in-depth interview with R10).

Conclusion

The removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria carries both positive and negative implications for the country's economy. On the positive side, this action, which constitutes a significant portion of government expenditure, will alleviate the financial burden on the government and curtail overall spending. Consequently, the government can redirect the funds saved towards critical sectors such as infrastructure, healthcare, and education. Furthermore, the discontinuation of fuel subsidies will encourage the growth of renewable energy sources like solar, wind, and hydropower, diminishing the nation's dependence on fossil fuels and promoting sustainable energy alternatives. This shift will also foster private sector involvement, fostering greater market competition, reducing prices, and enhancing service quality.

However, without accompanying measures to offset its adverse consequences, including but not limited to heightened living costs, inflation, and potential social unrest, the ramifications of this policy change may disproportionately impact the nation's impoverished citizens, exacerbating existing economic disparities.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of this study and the conclusion drawn from the findings, the following recommendations were put forward:

1. The government should establish social safety nets and targeted welfare programmes to support vulnerable and low-income households. These programmes can include cash transfers, food assistance, and subsidies on essential goods for the most affected individuals and families.
2. The government should invest in public transportation by allocating resources to improve and expand public transportation systems. This will provide an alternative to private vehicle usage, reducing the overall burden of increased fuel prices.
3. Government should create public awareness campaigns and educational awareness in order to inform the public about the reasons for fuel subsidy removal and its long-term benefits. Transparency in this process will foster understanding and acceptance.

4. The government should monitor price inflation by establishing mechanisms to monitor and control price inflation in response to the removal of fuel subsidies. This will prevent profiteering and ensure that the cost of living remains manageable.
5. The government should encourage local refining by investing in and supporting local oil refining capacity to reduce dependence on imported petroleum products. This will stabilise prices and create jobs in the region.
6. The stakeholders should be involved, including local communities, civil society organisations, and business associations, in the decision-making process and in the formulation of policies related to fuel subsidy removal.

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