

NAIJAPAUSE: OPPORTUNITIES KNOCKING, AND IT MIGHT JUST BE ONCE

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Abstract

Everyone is now aware of the reality of the coronavirus in Nigeria which has led to the cancelation of events, flights, and virtually everything that requires social, official, and religious gatherings. We are also aware that this pandemic will disrupt the Nigerian economy. What is most important there is to realize and acknowledge the existing challenges and take this opportunity to cushion the impact of the virus by introducing measures to protect companies and their workers, most especially the vulnerable citizens. This article is a prayer that: the Nigerian government should urgently develop a plan to deliver economic assistance to the vulnerable, clearly communicate its economic relief plans to the public and clarify eligibility, timelines, and procedures. For this, they should deploy more resources, creativity, and transparency to ensure the basic necessities of life to everyone. The opportunity is knocking... it might just be once.

Introduction

No one would have ever thought that it will take a pandemic and an economic crisis to start thinking of how we can re-evaluate our future in Nigeria!

The coronavirus has shaken the entire world like a wave of the tsunami. It did not show any form of discrimination, it affects people regardless of religion, class or wealth, that is so obvious especially in Nigeria it ignored any geographical border, and it demands attention by sweeping aside any attempts to deliver 'business as usual'. It exposed the ugly side of human selfishness as people stock-piled perceived necessities at the expense of others, ignoring requests by NCDC to stay at home and refusing to keep social distance. It has also shone a light on the strength of our nation, as many groups and individuals volunteered to help in cash and in many other ways. The health workers have placed themselves in danger everyday providing vital services, fighting the virus, and caring for the vulnerable and the sick. Companies put aside their competitive focus and profit-making activities as they transform products and services to overcome shortages in equipment and facilities. The period has brought families to spend more time together. We have seen renewed discovery of the value of nature and the outdoors as people find they have more time on their hands. We see people walking the distances they would have used cars. People grow their own vegetables, making their bread and buying produce from the local shops and farms.

No one can predict the future, but we can see trends, and the more we are able to spot them, the better our chances are of securing a better future. The coronavirus is upending life as we know, and so I am writing this article not to join the many who do not see the light at the end of the tunnel for Nigeria, but to give hope and courage that the Covid-19 crisis, despite its many sad and horrible implications in terms of sickness and death, is exactly the time for the *Naijapause*: the pause we actually need to galvanize us, to draw us together as one people, to see more clearly what we are collectively capable of achieving, and to bring into focus what needs to be done in the entire nation to secure the future of all Nigerians.

Realizing that already the Nigerian economic cycle is broken, or at least disrupted for some time. The usual Naija style has changed – irreversibly and forever, and my hope and prayer and my aim of writing this article is that the change will be for the better. A search for different answers has begun and should be sustained and a *new kind of normal* should quickly take shape to help all. ***Let our liability become our opportunity.*** Necessity is the mother of invention it is said. So in my attempt to understand the turmoil effect on the nation, I summarize the effect of this *'pause'* on individual aspects of our economy, focusing on first, primary sectors, which include industries involved in the extraction of raw materials, second, secondary sectors, which is involved in the production of finished products and third, tertiary sectors, including all service provision industries.

Primary Sectors

Industries under this category are basically involved in the extraction of natural raw materials. This explains why they are also called extractive industries; mining, fishing, farming, lumbering, and livestock.

Oil and Gas Industry: The petroleum industry is the backbone and the lifeblood of the Nigerian economy. Then on the background of a viral outbreak already dampening the demand for oil, and the already existing oil-price war is predicted to have grave implications for the Nigerian economy. The price of fuel has increased and there is an outcry already. The Nigerian Association of Petroleum Explorationists have warned that Nigeria risks disruption in oil and gas supplies and power generation, due to the declining exploration activity and depleting oil reserves. The industry faces inefficient contract and procurement awarding process, oil theft, and illegal refining as the key obstacles, says the president of NAPE, Ajibola Oyebamiji. He insists that oil theft and illegal refining are larger threats to Nigeria's oil industry than a decline in oil prices. In more ordinary times, cheap oil may have functioned as an advantage for economies. However, savings on petrol are unlikely to be redirected into more spending as the people are instructed to practice social distancing and the working class are uncertain about job security.

In March 2019, the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation plans to overhaul its refineries to help the nation save billions of dollars on fuel imports and has hired Maire Tecnimont from Italy to handle the Port Harcourt plant. There is a 445,000 barrels per day of refining capacity across four separate facilities in Nigeria, which operate well below capacity due to mismanagement and lack of investment, forcing the NNPC to import most of the gasoline into the country.⁶⁶

⁶⁶Nigeria's NNPC plans to revamp refineries to cut fuel imports| africanews, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 3]. Available from: <https://www.africanews.com/2019/03/23/nigeria-s-nnpc-plans-to-revamp-refineries-to-cut-fuel-imports/>

The Managing Director of the NNPC, Mr Mele Kyari in April hinted that all oil refineries in the country will be shut as it works to secure funding and a model to upgrade them. He said, “*Today, after proper scoping, which was not done in the past, we know exactly what to do to get them back on stream*” ... “*We believe the ongoing engagements between global oil producers will bring back demand and once that happens, the market will balance and fully recover by year-end.*”⁶⁷

President Muhammadu Buhari has pledged to stamp out corruption, invest in infrastructure and spread wealth evenly across the country. On all counts, his approach to the oil industry will be central. And so I believe that the problems are well known to all what we need is to use this moment to fix them. Aliko Dangote, is building a 650,000 barrels per day refinery around Lagos, that would meet Nigeria's current domestic demand and will still export. This project should be supported!

Agriculture: this sector as we all know is as well critical to the Nigerian economy, it has recorded steady growth throughout the recent recession in Nigeria and has supported macroeconomic stability against a backdrop of volatility in the global oil market. The workforce in the agriculture sector, exports and GDP contribution have fallen though, given that oil and gas production became Nigeria's economic mainstay, Nigeria is blessed with vast amounts of arable land and a large, diverse production base that includes many high-value cash crops, offering significant opportunity for development and investment. However, production hurdles have significantly stifled the performance of this sector and the coronavirus pandemic has further expanded its susceptibility and vulnerability to external factors. The security issues in many parts of Nigeria also creates a very serious problem to the agriculture sector.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said that over the past two decades, value-added per capita in agriculture has risen by less than 1% annually and it is estimated that Nigeria has lost 10 billion dollars in annual export opportunity due to continuous decline in the production of some commodities.⁶⁸ Experts have identified the factors undermining agricultural production which include, reliance on rain-fed agriculture, smallholder land holding, and low productivity due to poor planting material, low fertilizer application, and a weak agricultural extension system and absence of long term accessible cheap funds amongst many.⁶⁹

For sure the resilience of the Nigerian agricultural sector has been tested by the coronavirus pandemic. According to the Director-General, Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dr. Muda Yusuf, with Covid-19 induced lockdown in many states, the food situation was most likely to worsen with farmers having to cope with movement restrictions and paralyzed supply chains as transport restrictions and quarantine measures are likely to impede farmers access to markets thus curbing their productive capacities and hindering them from selling their produce.⁷⁰ For this I am pleading with the government to invest in partnerships with local communities and groups to reach the millions of small scale farmers in Nigeria and also create an enabling policy environment that takes into

⁶⁷ Nigeria to shut down its oil refineries in upgrade effort| Hydrocarbon Processing, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 3]. Available from: <https://www.hydrocarbonprocessing.com/news/2020/04/nigeria-to-shut-down-its-oil-refineries-in-upgrade-effort#:~:text=Nigeria%20has%20decided%20to%20shut,duet%20to%20years%20of%20underinvestment.>

⁶⁸ Oluchi Chibuzor, Repositioning Nigeria's Agriculture Sector, [This Day, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jun 29]. Available from: <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2020/05/14/repositioning-nigerias-agriculture-sector/>

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

account the needs of farmers, so that small scale farmers can scale up their businesses and transition from micro businesses to small, medium and large businesses.

If the agriculture sector is seen as an engine that contributes to the growth of the overall economy of Nigeria, I recommend that at this time of the pandemic government should provide more funding for agricultural universities in Nigeria to carry out researches on all areas of agricultural production that will lead to more exports and improvement in the competitiveness of Nigeria agriculture production in the international markets. The Central bank of Nigeria should also come up with a stable policy for loan disbursement for farmers at a reasonable interest payback. This will in turn pull millions out of the existing cycle of poverty and drive the agricultural transformation that will ensure economic sustainability. This can be realized only through the provision of appropriate, affordable and timely financing, increased budget allocation to the Agric sector, training and capacity building, innovation and skilled development. Our government should importantly establish more research centers to improve seedling production, encourage use of irrigation farming system and provision of storage facilities for seasonal products as means of improving the country's agricultural output. This '*pause*' has created that opportunity to put in the necessary effort to ensure small scale farmers achieve the scale necessary to deliver real and long-term impact.

Secondary Sectors

The secondary sector of the manufacturing industry is concerned generally with turning raw materials into consumables or finished products. This sector includes: construction, textile, building, shipbuilding, iron and steel and chemical industries.

Manufacturing Industry: *“The manufacturing industry is defined as the industry that is involved in the turning of raw material into a new product by mechanical or chemical processes at home or in the factory.”*⁷¹

The impact of manufacturing on economic development in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. It is extremely difficult for any to grow its wealth without investing in the manufacturing industry. A strong and thriving manufacturing sector usually precipitates industrialization. This plays a vital role in the Nigerian economy and also in the lives of the people. The manufacturing industry is motivated by a number of factors to utilize input like raw-materials, land and manpower in the production of physical or tangible products for their consumers' satisfaction. the manufacturing industry consists of: food industry, paper products industry, textile and apparel production industry, chemical manufacturing, leather and footwear production, furniture and wood production, metal manufacturing, computer and electronics products, coal products and petroleum, rubber and plastics manufacturing, mineral products (non-metal), machinery manufacturing, printing industry, tobacco products and beverages, and made in Nigeria products. Nigeria being blessed with different raw materials that serve the basic needs for manufacturing.

The manufacturing sector in Nigeria faces some difficulties; most prominent is the power supply. Most firms rely on *emergency* power generators to run seamless operations, adding to the cost of their products. They also face regulatory issues, multiplicity of taxes, and trade facilitation issues, just to mention a few. Nigeria's infrastructural deficiencies are also a major constraint. The Covid-19 pandemic is already ushering challenges to the Nigerian industrial manufacturers, especially those that depend on workers whose jobs cannot be carried out remotely. Uncertainty surrounding the duration (or even a

⁷¹ Manufacturing Industry in Nigeria, |steemit.com, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 1]. Available from: <https://steemit.com/science/@musteethany/manufacturing-industry-in-nigeria>

deepening) of those conditions clouds any insights into how a recovery could unfold for the industry. Indeed, many beleaguered companies in manufacturing should be eligible for government stimulus support. But there is a real possibility that the crisis will result in bankruptcy for some manufacturers, as declining demand, production and revenues, along with debt obligations, take their cumulative toll. This coronavirus outbreak is causing widespread concern and economic hardship for consumers, businesses and communities across Nigeria.

Yes, it is true that lack of funds and an enabling environment for industrialists have denied the nation the capacity to achieve significant industrial growth or industrialization which Nigeria has always hoped and craved for. This period of *pause* therefore, gives us an opportunity have a rethink, considering the enormous importance that we attach to industrialization and how it impacts on our economy, and so, whatever it is that militates against its achievement should be of interest to us all and especially our government.

My plea here is to remind our politicians about the promises made about their desire to help our manufacturing and boost industrial production. It is a noble endeavor to boost our industry and rebalance the economy away from financial services to manufacturing especially at this period of the pandemic. So I suggest:

- First and foremost, security is required in Nigeria for any meaningful industrial venture to thrive.
- That government should try and create a stable macroeconomic environment – low inflation, and a sustained positive economic growth.
- Provide satisfactory availability of credit – A working banking sector that is ready to lend to firms.
- Provide an improved labor productivity – to make sure workers have better education and training.
- Government should also invest in infrastructure – create better transport links to reduce firms' costs.
- Provision of subsidy to help develop certain technologies
- There should also and very importantly be stable exchange rate.

With all in mind we all know that the sector needs innovation and smart techniques to cut costs. Until there is a complete implementation of the National Industrial Revolution Plan, the sector may continue to struggle. As the pandemic continues to expand, manufacturers are facing challenges on numerous fronts. At the outset of any major commercial disruption, companies will be looking for immediate measures to keep their workforces safe and their businesses solvent. But companies should also be looking to the future. Which assets, people, capabilities will they need or want then? Most companies in the Nigerian manufacturing sector will need to take concrete steps to succeed in this challenging climate. Some will be austere, but austerity measures should be tempered to preserve long-term objectives. The best approach is likely to include making surgical cuts, while balancing short-and long-term needs. Every company is unique, but each faces the same concerns: where to begin, how to keep people protected, when to communicate, and what is the right way to move forward.⁷²

⁷² Industries, |pwc, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 6]. Available from: <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/industries.html>

Tertiary Sector

The tertiary sector normally provides services to other businesses as well as financial consumers. The focus usually on people interacting with other people and serving the customer rather than transforming physical goods. Healthcare industry, education industry, finance industry, aviation and sports industry are a few to mention. I shall only reflect on education and healthcare industries which at this point if taken care of can also have great positive effects on other industries.

Healthcare industry: The coronavirus has drawn our attention to the already overburdened public health system in Nigeria (just to be charitable), we have seen also the challenges faced in recruiting, deploying, retaining and protecting sufficient well-trained, and motivated health workers.⁷³ The Covid-19 outbreak has severely impacted in the entire supply chain in the healthcare industry from the procurement of raw materials to production and distribution. The need for medical ventilators at a global level triggered the manufacturers to increase production by up to 40% to 50%. The manufacturers have also collaborated with automakers to meet the growing demand.⁷⁴

President Muhammadu Buhari is known for his anti-corruption campaign since taking over power in 2015. However, a lot of effort is focused on grand corruption at the higher levels of governance and politics. There is less emphasis on the less-talked-about but vulnerable areas such as the health industry. In the battle against this pandemic, health system resilience, accountability and integrity are more important than ever. The health systems of some rich countries have become overwhelmed by the rising number of infected persons and deaths from the disease. Countries with less resilient health systems are more vulnerable. Research has clearly shown the vulnerability of Nigeria's health system. A consistently solid and accountable health system has eluded the country. The requisite health resources are also in short supply. The Nigerian Association of Resident Doctors demands that the government provide members with more personal protective equipment and hazard pay in treating patients infected with Covid-19, or they will escalate the strike they began in June 2020. And the reality is that citizens, health workers and international development partners worry that Nigeria's health system is very weak and may be unable to adequately combat Covid-19.⁷⁵ With the current situation in Nigeria, even after the immediate emergency of the Covid-19, the healthcare industry won't return to business as usual.

On this the Secretary to the Government of the Federation and the chairman of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on Covid-19, Boss Mustapha, decried the poor state of Nigeria's healthcare infrastructure. He said, *"I can tell you for sure, I never knew that our*

⁷³ This is not ignoring the fact that our health workers complained and truly so, were not well taken care of. My point here is to stress the fact that amidst all these challenges they are always resilient and ready to motivate and support themselves to care for the sick. As we saw in the case of Dr Ameyo Adadevoh, whom we all know despite the pressure and threat from the Liberian government to discharge Patrick Sawyer, resisted and said *for the sake of public good* she will not release him. She prevented the Nigerian index case from leaving the hospital, thereby curbing the spread of the virus in Nigeria. She was infected by the Ebola virus and later paid the supreme price with her life.

⁷⁴ COVID-19 Outbreak Impact on Healthcare Market Analysis, Size Projection, Regional Insights, Research Overview and Future Trends By 2022 | medgadget newsletter, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 4]. Available from: <https://www.medgadget.com/2020/05/covid-19-outbreak-impact-on-healthcare-market-analysis-size-projection-regional-insights-research-overview-and-future-trends-by-2022.html>

⁷⁵ Obinna Onwujekwe, et al., Coronavirus: corruption in health care could get in the way of Nigeria's response, | The Conversation, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 6]. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-corruption-in-health-care-could-get-in-the-way-of-nigerias-response-136913>

entire healthcare infrastructure was in the state in which it is. Until I was appointed to do this work."⁷⁶ He said this in a meeting he had with the leadership of the National Assembly. He also acknowledged that it is an opportunity to now examine the state of the national health industry which requires immediate reforms and funding. *The current pandemic has demonstrated the central importance of health in our national life – without it, we have nothing. It has also shown how we can do things differently as regards to financing health care in Nigeria.*⁷⁷

Amidst all these issues there is hope as Mr Boss Mustapha assured Nigerians that there are plans to lay a legacy foundation for the immediate, medium and long-term development of the health system in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic across the country. On this he continues that the task force has proposed to utilize the resources mobilized in a "strategic way". Which is: direct development and delivery of critical infrastructure to states by donors; direct procurement and delivery of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other critical equipment by donors; deployment of rapid response teams to states for capacity building and support; and expansion of the testing capacity in the country.⁷⁸

A period like this is an opportunity to make amends and the *pause* also highlights the strong need for sustainable investment in the health systems, including the health workforce, and for decent working conditions, training and equipment, especially in relation to personal protective equipment and occupational safety. Social dialogue is essential to building resilient health systems, and therefore has a critical role both in crisis response and in building a future that is prepared for health emergencies.

Education: The novel coronavirus has affected all levels of education system. Many countries have (rightly) decided to close schools, colleges and universities. The crisis crystallizes the dilemma policymakers are facing between closing schools (reducing contacts and saving lives) and keeping them open (allowing workers to work and maintaining the economy). Teachers have had to adapt to a world of almost universal distance education as nearly all students have faced school closures. Majority of the teachers have embraced this challenge, although in many developing countries teachers lack the skills and equipment to provide distance education effectively. The Covid-19 pandemic poses unprecedented challenges, for an already weak educational system, on the government, students and parents, that will highlight and could amplify some of the cracks in the system. As Nigeria grapples with these challenges, a key question arises: *Is the Nigerian education system designed to adapt rapidly to the changing world?* Looking at the reality of things around the world today, the nation's ability to ensure continuation of learning will depend largely on their ability to swiftly harness available technology, provide adequate infrastructure, and mobilize stakeholders to prepare alternative learning programs.

This pandemic has uncovered substantial inequities in the education sector. Private and non-governmental sectors are tirelessly working to salvage this situation. Projects such as Digiterate and Teach for Nigeria hope to ensure proper tools for education are

⁷⁶QueenEsther Iroanusi, I never knew Nigeria's healthcare infrastructure was in such bad state, | Premium Times, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jun 28]. Available from: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/health/health-news/387036-i-never-knew-nigerias-healthcare-infrastructure-was-in-such-bad-state-sgf.html>

⁷⁷Oluwatola Toluwani, Opinion: COVID-19 is a game-changer for health financing in Nigeria, | devex, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jun 30]. Available from: <https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-covid-19-is-a-game-changer-for-health-financing-in-nigeria-97117>

⁷⁸QueenEsther Iroanusi, I never knew Nigeria's...

available in Lagos.⁷⁹ Generally, Nigeria's education sector is not adapting, and it is expected to struggle on that front for the foreseeable future. However, the consequential socio-economic burden will be borne disproportionately by students in public schools, as compared to those in private schools. While several private have begun to initiate distance learning programs, taking advantage of the myriad of ICT-learning opportunities provided by the international community, the government limited funds and persistent deficiencies in planning, is yet to announce any plans for providing distance learning opportunities, especially for public schools except of course the announcement that JSS 3 and SSS 3 will resume to write exam because they are transitional classes. The implication being that these students in public schools currently have no formal learning plans and could be missing learning altogether.⁸⁰

Chief Obafemi Awolowo states that “*The children of the poor you failed to train will never let your children have peace.*” This is a clarion call on our government to use this pause to bridge the gap of educational inequity by funding sufficiently the education industry. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic is just one out of many implications of educational inequity, no one knows what awaits us in the future, so it is very important that our government provide an equitable and inclusive learning environment for the students to ensure continuity in learning for all, irrespective of their socio-economic background.

We should never forget that education remains the solution to whatever kind of problems. Let us therefore come all together to make Nigeria better and greater through quality and wholistic education. Education in Nigeria should be seen as a high government priority especially at a time like this. Help in increasing awareness of the pressing need for the country's children to be educated, especially those from low-income families, continue with the almajiri education, will benefit the nation's economy in years to come.

Funding provided for this noble endeavor is always seen and surely it is, an investment in human capital; the more educated a nation is, the more productive it is. Of all sustainable missions, surely the most pressing is to improve lives, and there is no better way to do so than proper education for all.

We should all look at large scale and national efforts to utilize technology to support remote learning, distance education and online learning during and after the coronavirus. And the biggest change may not end up being how much time we spend online but how we spend it.

Conclusion

One thing most Nigerians share is that there are so much unjust structures. They will surely not disappear quickly. We know as well that unjust structures require unjust beliefs to hold them up. Taking apart the structures goes hand in hand with challenging the beliefs. This is something I hold dear to my heart. To always remind us that yes things are 'bad' in Nigeria but they can also be remedied if we collectively believe. By *Naijapause* I mean we collectively retreat to see what our problems are and what we can do to resolve them. I chose a few major sectors that are the pillars of our great nation. The coronavirus has

⁷⁹Toritseju April Amorighoye, COVID-19 has exposed the education divide in Nigeria, |World Economic Forum, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 5]. Available from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/education-nigeria-covid19-digital-divide/>

⁸⁰Thelma O & Adedeji A, COVID-19: Impending Situation Threatens to Deepen Nigeria's Education Crisis, |CSEA, [internet]. [cited 2020 Jul 7]. Available from: <https://media.africaportal.org/documents/COVID19-Impending-Situation-Threatens-to-Deepen-Nigerias-Education-.pdf>

exposed the flaws in response of governments to healthcare and social security in both developed and developing world alike. Nigeria's reliance on oil exports to fund government expenditure has made the country particularly vulnerable following the collapse in oil prices, embarking on medical tourism weakens the health system of the nation. We wait to see with great hope, whether the aggressive steps the Federal Government has taken will be enough to successfully mitigate the effects of the crisis. A small silver lining is the belief that the oil price fall and this *pause* will act as the catalysts for the economic diversification that we desire. There are fears of new recession and financial collapse, moments like this call for resilient and strong leadership in healthcare, education, agriculture, manufacturing, government and wider society. Immediate relief measure needs to be implemented and adjusted for those that may fall through the cracks. Medium and longer-term planning is needed to re-balance and re-energize the economy following this crisis. A better way to stimulate the Nigerian economy at this time would be to have specific and measurable objectives that can unleash the potential of Nigerians.

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