

The State and Politics of Public Policy Making in Nigeria: The Dilemma of Fuel Subsidy Removal Policy

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Abstract
Nigeria has struggled with several developmental policies since independence in 1960. These policies seem to have failed to address numerous challenges that prompted their adoptions, mainly because of the character of Nigerian state, alien nature of the policies, poor implementation and class preferences. This paper examined the gap between class consensus and public choice in Nigeria's policy process with a specific focus on subsidy removal. It argued that lack of synergy between rentier class preferences and the pressing needs of Nigerians as well as leadership distrust seemed to have remained the greatest dilemma confronting subsidy policy in Nigeria. It concluded that this seemingly disconnect between the rulers and the ruled coupled with unrepentant pseudo and pretences of government have characteristically plunged subsidy removal policy in the morgue where political brigands audaciously plunder the gains accruable from it. The study adopted qualitative descriptive analytical methods and relied on the theory of rentier state. It recommended a paradigm shift from the hitherto ruling class design policies to an all inclusive approach in which democratic institutions and citizens will play a major role in determining what forms the policies of the Nigerian State.

Keywords: State, Politics, Public Policy, Subsidy Removal

1. Introduction

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has borrowed, adopted and implemented numerous policies in an attempt to address several developmental challenges. Thus, under military and civilian regimes the Nigerian state has witnessed the implementation of policy of Indigenization and Nationalization; Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Austerity Measure, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), Liberalization and deregulation, the Privatization of Public Enterprises, Cashless policy in the Banking Industry and subsidy removal among others. While it could be noted that these policies vary in terms of time, objective, content and implementation, we emphasized that they have arguably produced same result; that is underdevelopment.

In 1999, virtually all levels of government introduced and adopted different poverty reduction measures. Several States re-introduced free education as part of strategies to reducing high rate of illiteracy. At the National level, the Obasanjo led administration created Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), which was later in 2001 christened National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP). Hence, the establishment of domestic Millennium Development Goals-like programme tagged National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). The programme was further extended to various States and Local areas as State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS) and Local Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (LEEDS) (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013b).

The above domestic search for prosperity - though constrained with insensitivity and corruption - coincided with the global trend of subsidy removal especially on oil and gas. For instance during 2009 and 2010 government efforts to curb fossil-fuel subsidies burgeoned with fossil-fuel subsidy reform, becoming a frequent topic on international agenda (Lang, 2011. Thus, in some societies, especially the developed societies, governments cautiously implement this policy with gradual approach to eschew crisis that may accompany the process. For instance, in Germany, government proposes to discontinue subsidized coal mining in a socially acceptable manner by the end of 2018 beginning in 2011 (Lang, 2011). The policy was pre-announced and the state engaged gradual subsidy reduction with prudent public awareness campaigns and efforts at political transparency and accountability. Pearce & Von Finckenstein (2002) argued that reform is complex and its success is difficult to guarantee. For them, privatization may simply shift rents from the public to the private sector. Similarly, subsidy regimes seem peculiar as it may streamline processes of rent dissipation.

Since 1999 the government has vigorously pursue deregulation of the downstream sector with the argument that it would encourage investors to partner with government and ensure speedy transformation of the oil and gas sector. This in the view of government would reduce the subsidy bills from government and free substantial amount of fund for development. According to government report, over N3.6 trillion was paid out in petroleum product subsidies in the period from January 2006 to August 2011 (Ibrahim & Unom, 2011). In 2010 the subsidy bill was N673 billion while in 2011, it has more than doubled to N1.348 trillion for the first ten months, with the full year's total expected to be about 115 percent of the federal capital budget (Ibrahim & Unom, 2011). Considering this financial burden, government argues that subsidy removal would assist government to provide basic infrastructure and safeguard the future of Nigerians. However, the failure of the Nigerian leaders since 1960 to build infrastructures necessary for socio-economic development seems to be responsible for the present crisis. In fact, the reliance on importation of petroleum products rather than developing effective production structures for local production is not unconnected to the character of the Nigerian state for sustenance of rent. Consequently, this appears to have collapsed several public policies in Nigeria. Thus, the inability of the post-independence Nigerian state to successfully evolve policies with curative strategies and indeed ensure effective policy implementation for speedy socio-economic transformation and development has been well documented. There seems to be scholarly consensus that several government policies in Nigeria such as:

> Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) 1976; Green Revolution 1979; Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure, 1986; National Directorate of Employment, 1986; Better Life for Rural Women, 1987; Nigerian Agricultural Insurance Cooperation, 1987; National Agricultural Land Development Agency (NALDA), 1989; National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) 1989; Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), 1992; Nigerian Agricultural Cooperative and Rural Development Bank 2000; Forestry Development Programme, 2000; Roll Back Malaria, 2001; National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), 2004 tend to have failed to actualize its objectives (Nwankwo, 2012: 159; Obamwonyi & Aibieyi, 2014: 40; Odigbo, 2012: 208).

As can be seen, virtually three years of the implementation of partial subsidy removal in Nigeria, the benefits of the policy are still remained to be seen. This study seeks to examine the interface between rentier class preferred policies and the populace choice in Nigerian policy process with a specific focus on subsidy removal policy of the Nigerian government. This is to determine whether it is peoples' resistance to some policies or the concealed motive underlining class consensus that undermines public policy in Nigeria.

1.1 Subsidy Removal: Conceptual Issues

There seems to be divergent views in the extant literature especially by researchers on the meaning and essence of subsidy and its removal as it has gradually become a policy of global significance. Dissimilarities in the concept exist and therefore in the formal definition of subsidies arise largely from difference in the way the term has come to be used in everyday speech and by professionals working in separate economic and legal disciplines (Steenblik, in Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2003: 103). For him, the origin of common usage of the word could be traced to the late Middle Ages, when the English Parliament granted funds to the King to supplement or replace customs duties and other taxes collected by royal prerogative. Over the time, continued increment of other forms of payments provided by government and other agencies promoted the notion that subsidy seems to be a direct government payments to reduce actual cost.

Thus, Steenblik as in OECD (2003: 106) these practices formed the current definition of a subsidy given in the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on subsidies and countervailing measures (SCM Agreement) which was signed at the end of the General Agreement on Tariff Trade-sponsored Uruguay Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations. The agreement thus, states that a subsidy shall be deemed to exist if: A (1):there is a financial contribution by a government or any public body within the territory of a member i.e. where:

(i) a government practice involves a direct transfer of funds (e.g. grants, loans and guarantees);
(ii) government revenue that is otherwise due is forgone or not collected (e.g. Fiscal incentives such as tax credits);
(iii) a government provides goods or services other than general infrastructure, or purchases goods;
(iv) a government makes payments to a funding mechanism or entrusts or directs a private body to carry out one or more of the type of functions illustrated in (i) to (iii) above which would normally be vested in the government and the practice, in no real sense differs from practices normally followed by governments;

A (2) there is any form of income or price support in the sense of Article XVI of GATT 1994 (OECD 2003: 112).

For Pearce & Von Finckenstein (2002) subsidies could be explained from two perspectives; these are the producer subsidies and the consumer subsidies. Pearce & von Finckenstein (2002: 1) see producer subsidy to be "any form of intervention that lowers the cost of production of a producer, or raises the price received by the producer, compared to the cost and price that would prevail in an undistorted market". For them, this definition allows us to distinguish subsidies from interventions that raise market prices but where the increase in price does not accrue to the producer. They further explained that the definition embraces all transfers to producers, regardless of whether they are targeted on products, or simply take the form of cash sums payable to producers.

Thus, consumer subsidies similarly lower the price that the consumer would pay if there were a free market in the commodity in question (Pearce & von Finckenstein, 2002).

Following from the above, subsidies could be referred to as the payments or fraction of money paid by the government to reduce the costs of production or lower the price the consumers pay for the products (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2014). Thus, fuel subsidy could be seen as the fraction of money that consumers would have paid to enjoy the use of petroleum products but is paid by government so as to relieve the price burden. In their separate views, Hornby (2005), Agu (2009), OECD (2005), Ovaga (2010) and Ellis (2010) posited that subsidies are government revenues forgone for the purposes of providing essential services to the people. More specifically, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2005) defined a subsidy as “a result of a government action that confers an advantage on consumers or producers, in order to supplement their income or lower their costs” (cited in Ellis 2010:10).

It is the disparity between the international price of a commodity and domestic price which is paid by government. On the other way, subsidy could be seen as a form of price management whereby governments fix the prices of goods for consumers and pay the retailer the difference between the actual market price and the regulated price. In the same vein, Hornby (2005:1476) explains subsidy as “money that is paid by a government or an organization to reduce the cost of producing goods and services so that their prices can be kept low”. To Widodo *et al* (2012: 178) subsidy is defined as “any government action that lowers the cost of energy production, raises the revenue of energy producers, or lowers the price paid by energy consumers”. Essentially, subsidy tends to serve as government intervention to reduce cost, enhance the capacity and the purchasing power of her citizens which seems to improve general welfare.

Conversely, subsidy removal could be seen as the elimination of all forms of financial commitments or incentives by government thereby paving the way for market forces to determine the prices of goods and services. It means consumers purchasing goods at real market prices. Specifically, fuel subsidy removal is the withdrawal of government financial involvement in determining or reducing the actual pump price of petroleum products. While subsidy tends to provide distributional objectives generally, justifying its cost sometimes remains difficult hence the argument for its removal. The underlying suspicion must be that the vast majority of these subsidies not only fail to support the incomes of low income earners or vulnerable groups in society (Pearce, 2003).

However, most responsible governments tend to be selective on areas to be subsidized and areas not to subsidize. This is to ensure that the gap between the poor and the rich is adequately narrowed and more importantly to provide greatest happiness to greatest number of people which should be one of the ultimate goals of a responsible government. Indeed, many Western Capitalists states still subsidize food, water, etc. For instance, in Nigeria epileptic power supply and infrastructural decay especially roads and power tends to have elevated the role of petroleum products as a household necessity. In this regard, protecting the poor would ordinarily be a central agenda that would pre-occupy the policy thrust of any responsible government. Hence, removing subsidy on fuel may like increased unnecessary hardship because it places the poor on a more disadvantageous condition; owing to the fact that there is lack of close substitute for the product.

1.1.2 Theoretical Discourse

The study adopted the theory of rentier state. The concept of rentier state is mainly derived from the classical economic notion of rent which is described as excess value or surplus left over after the cost of production had been met, and was paid to the owners of the land for use of its natural resources (Yates, 1996). Initially, this theory is used to describe most of the governments of the Mideast and North Africa since they derive a large fraction of their revenues from external rents (Yates, 1996; Ross, 2001; Schwarz, 2004; Smith, 2004; Mahdavy, 1970; Beblawi, 1987) and the conflicts arising from distribution of the wealth or rents (Klare, 2001). More specifically Schwarz (2004:13-14) observes that:

> The most important and influential contributions to the volume of debates on rentier state were the two articles by Giacomo Luciani on “Allocation vs. Production States” and Hazem Beblawi on “The Rentier State in the Arab World” in which the authors argued that those states that derived most or a substantial part of their revenues from the outside world and whose functioning of the political system depends to a large degree on accruing external revenues that can be classified as rents, showed a remarkable different political dynamic than other (i.e. productive) states. Rents were defined as “the income derived from the gift of nature” and are thus usually understood to be income accrued from the export of natural resources, especially oil and gas.

The theory is primarily state-centred, but nonetheless, comes in different forms and emphasizes different causal links between resource rents and poor economic governance, as well as authoritarian rule (Ross, 2001; Rosser, 2006). Indeed, rents not only determine the characteristics of the national economy but also the patterned functionality of the state institutions and perhaps more importantly the government attitude towards society. Rentierism therefore focuses on rents in government finances (Herb, 2002).

Following from the above, it could be stated that Nigeria's condition is akin to the circumstances in the North Africa and most Middle East. First, the Nigerian state prior to the current democratic practice has been under the control of autocratic military dictatorship. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, is the fact that Nigeria generates more than 90% of her revenue from oil, hence the violence arising from the resource management. For instance, the Niger Delta has engaged the Nigerian state in decades of lingering violence for negligence and underdevelopment.

As can be seen, subsidy removal programme is to create a new platform for rent dissipation in Nigeria. With massive opposition from the populace the government quickly established Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme to provide services aimed at cushioning the effects of partial subsidy removal. However, the poor performance of the agency (SURE-P) buttresses the doubt that government may not deploy resources accruable from the programme to address major development challenges. From outset, government is awash with lots of jobless cronies hence, creating an agency to accommodate them became necessary. In fact, Mohammed (2013) observed that investigations have however confirmed that former President, Goodluck Jonathan's campaign coordinators in the 2011 elections have taken charge of the SURE-P scheme. According Mohammed (2013:26):

> The coordinators include the following persons who worked for President Jonathan in 2011: Alhaji Bode Oyedele (Lagos), Mr Joseph Ishekpa (Nasarawa), Alhaji Garba A. Kurfi (Katsina), Alhaji Aliyu Mamman (Niger), Alhaji Adamu Yaro Gombe (Gombe), Hon Femi Akinyemi (Ekiti), Jarigbe Agbom Jarigbe (Cross River), Chief Abdullahi Ohioma (Kogi), Dare Adeleke (Oyo), Alhaji Al-Kasim Madoka (Kano), and Mr Bulus Daren (Plateau) .

The implication of the above is that SURE-P was established purposefully for rent dissipation. The government preference of political job-seekers (especially those who worked for his election in 2011) to technocrats to man and pilot the affairs of such agency of immense relevance is an indication that SURE-P was not initiated to really cushion the hardship arising from subsidy as initially claimed. Unfortunately, government has failed severally to justify subsidy bills and in several occasions decline public debate on it. Thus, it is important to note that changing patterns in the rules governing oil business is a tune to continual changes in rent circulation. This process ensures that newly emerged rentier class is in cooperated and a means to facilitate a robust financial base for the new agents. Majorly, the financial accessibility tends to assist the class to maintain a vast army of subordinates such as personal assistance. It creates portfolios for pacifying agitators, allies, friends and collaborators. Such agencies failed in line with inexorably failed government that created it. For instance, the subsidy reinvestment and empowerment programme was established in January 2012 after nationwide protest against fuel subsidy removal. Till date, this agency seems to be immersed in either duplication of other agencies project, missing money or other high corrupt incidences.

In fact, while it could be argued that Nigerians seem to be victims of subsidy programme, the partial removal connotes complete conquest. As can be seen, the emergence of Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) to cushion the effect of the subsidy removal appears to have streamlined wealth distribution processes among the class, cronies, party loyalists and has actually precluded the people for benefiting from the remnants that trickled down in the subsidy programme (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2014). It could be stated that shady deals in the downstream sector by government, agencies, allies and collaborators tend to increase financial responsibility on subsidy in Nigeria. Indeed, subsidy removal has not translated into general enhancement of good life in Nigeria. With the corrosiveness of corruption in Nigeria, poor governance, weak democratic institutions, lack of focus, vision of SURE-P and elitist desire to continue to recycle wealth accruable from oil among themselves, one may conclude in the opinion of Ross (2001) that "oil actually hurts democracy" in Nigeria. In fact, it is our view that subsidy has little or no contribution to the present underdevelopment hence its removal would only make funds available for maintaining bogus parastatals and political job-hunters.

1.1.3 Subsidy Removal Policy: Between Rentier Class and the Popular Opposition

The class perspective of public policy formulation and implementation assumes that public policies are actually the reflection of values preferred by the members of a particular class in any given society and to a certain extent than those of the general aspirations of the people. In fact, Dye (1981) posited that "public policy reflects elite values, serves elites ends, and is a product of elites". Interestingly, the question that has not been answered is what actually constitutes class values. In contemporary societies especially in developing countries where remtierism is more predominant, what forms class values tend to be at variants with the aspirations of people who bear the brunt of underdevelopment. This is because rentier class who forms the nucleus of state administrators are implicated in severally failed development agenda, arising from corruption, poor governance and insensitivity. In this regard, such class values may instigate some sort of public resistance thereby making public policy more controversial.

It is based on the above analogy that stiff opposition that confronted subsidy removal policy of government in 2012 could be explained. Thus, the Federal Government announced the subsidy removal in January 2012, stating that it would be saving about N1.3 trillion per annum, which the government plans to use to shore up other sectors of the economy, such as infrastructure provisions particularly for effective downstream operations (Nwachukwu, 2011; Okigbo & Enekebe, 2011). Evidently, efforts by experts, in the corridors of power; including the former Central Bank Governor, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, the Federal Minister of Finance, Dr. Mrs. Ngozi Okonji-Iweala, Federal Minister of Petroleum Resources, Mrs. Deziani Allison-Madueke, among others, seem not to be cogent enough to convince Nigerians that this policy measure is capable of enhancing the economic fortunes of this country.

Consequently, there was massive strike actions and protests in many states and major cities in the country by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Trade Union Congress of Nigeria, Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASAN), Civil Society Organizations, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the generality of Nigerians (Ering & Akpan, 2012). Thus, thousands of Nigerians from every social class found a means of conveying their grievances against the state during the protests. For many, the damage such policy may inflict on ordinary Nigerians seems to outweigh every other concern. The hike of fuel pump price affected everything; it correspondingly escalated the prices of food, transportation and other basic necessities and raises prices of commodity astronomically beyond the reach of people especially the poor. Arguably, the intense pressure and the threatening resistance of the people which coincided with the revolutionary uprising in the North Africa and Middle East in 2012 tends to have compelled the government to rescind the decision.

Following the reversal to partial subsidy removal that pegged the price of fuel at 97 and other promises made by government the protest was called off. Some of these pledges include the provision of a special mass transit program, the establishment of Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme, the Presidential order to cut 25% from the salaries of top government officials. Also, the savings from partial subsidy removal are to be shared among the three levels of government under SURE-P arrangement, to improve infrastructure nationwide. Under this arrangement the federal government receives 41 percent of the subsidy revenue while the state and local government receive 59 percent (Mohammed, 2013).

However, in spite of global acceptance on the need to phase out subsidies depending on national priorities, and domestic efforts by governments to implement same, the policy seems to be difficult to implement in Nigeria. The chilling evidences and profligacy of the managers of the scheme seems to have justified popular resistance in Nigeria. For instance, in December 2012 during a presentation to the Joint Committee on Petroleum Resources of the National Assembly, the former chairman of the committee, Dr. Kolade, presented documents to the Federal Lawmakers. The document showed that N2.2billion had been spent on a line item called "secretariat services" and another N75 million on "tours" inspecting projects nationwide within a period of four months (Mohammed, 2013). Secondly and perhaps more importantly, is the fact that till date, one can hardly point at any federal government mass transport scheme nationwide establish in response to partial subsidy removal package.

Arguably, lack of transparency, corruption, poor governance, insincerity and odious value orientation especially among the rentier class appear not to have assuaged the task of policy acceptance and implementation in Nigeria. The programme of looting and despoliation of public funds seems to have become a norm. It reflects in virtually every facet of Nigeria‘s economic and political class. This challenge needs urgent attention more than subsidy. The rentier class is implicated in all these challenges. The bases should rather be attitudinal change of the class and provision of quality leadership, such that can inspire people and revive their trust on government.

1.1.4 Failure of Fuel Subsidy Removal Policy in Nigeria: A Reflection of the Challenges of Development Policies in Nigeria

The Nigerian state seems to have struggled for more than half a century in an attempt to evolve policy options for national development. Essentially, public policies are seen as deliberate plan of action that guide government decisions in modern nations, both developed and developing societies design policies in the attainment of several state objectives that are geared towards empowering man to overcome daily needs, as well as overall development of the entire society. A policy may be referred to as the process of making relevant institutional and organizations decisions which include the identification of different alternatives such as programmes or priorities on expenditures, and making choices among them based on the impact they will have (Obamwonyi & Aibieyi, 2014: 38).

Thus, in spite of the centrality of state policies in the development process, Nigeria appears not to have derived consummate or desirable benefit from variety of policies and programmes implemented by government over the years. For instance, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) was introduced in 1972 to ensure increased food production in Nigeria through the active involvement and participation of all in an effort to encourage individuals for self-reliance and sustenance. However, one of the reasons adduced for the failure of the programme according to Iwuchukwu & Igbokwe (2012), is that preference was given to government establishments and individuals in authority/administration over the poor farmers (real producer of food) in terms of input supply.
Following from the above, it is important to note that most policies in Nigeria failed either as a result of poor articulation, discontinuity, reflection of external agenda, top-down character of implementation or total exclusion of the targeted audience. Indeed, the Green Revolution of 1979, the Nigerian Agricultural Insurance Cooperation of 1987, Roll Back Malaria 2001, National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), 2004, Millennium Development Goals etc are all policies of immense relevance but failed to provide corresponding remedial response to the challenges that necessitated their adoption and implementation. Thus, Obamwonyi & Aibieyi, (2014) explained that many times, the policies and programmes are either never executed half way or are jettisoned due to 'inbuilt failure' or by sheer deliberate failure. For them, the citizens and the entire country suffer from the policy failures to the detriment of the general development of the country.

As we noted earlier, subsidy removal is a global trend conceived by the West. There is also no doubt that the policy has enormously been beneficial to most of the Western capitalist states. However, since 1999 when Nigeria returned to democratic governance, successive administrations have engaged several policies including deregulation of the downstream sector and subsequently subsidy removal. Thus, subsidy policy in Nigeria is challenged with massive public opposition. The hostility and skepticism that accompanied the policy may not be unconnected to the failure of several other previous government policies. Secondly, petroleum product is very essential and could be seen as a household necessity in Nigeria. As a result, what seems to be total lack of guarantee, trust on government willingness to prudently and judiciously manage proceeds accruable from the programme informs peoples resistance. For instance, Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) created in 2012 to cushion effects of subsidy programme tends to have been consumed by the same ailment (these are corruption, lack continuity, top-down approach and externally conceived nature of these policies) that collapsed other policies in Nigeria.

Based on the above, we make bold to state that the trend to eliminate subsidy would continue to stifle the existing hardship in Nigeria hence the failure of government to provide sustainable alternatives. In fact, Nwanegbo & Odigbo (2014) argued that subsidy has failed to steer the economy to sustainability with several cases of mixing and misappropriation of accrued funds from partial subsidy removal. Indeed, subsidy removal in Nigeria seems to be an attempt to streamline class programme of pilfering from national treasury.

1.1.5 Conclusion

From the analysis, we have argued that subsidy removal has become global issue as a result of heavy financial commitment and burden on states. We also noted that some states still subsidies some commodities especially those which high prices may be disadvantageous to the poor. This is to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich. However, it is our position that the rentier character of the Nigerian state is one of the problems that has hampered public policy in Nigeria. The prevailing poor leadership attitude over the years and corrosive corruption has prompted public distrust hence every government policy is treated with disdain. In some cases, the public outrightly rejects state policy with the notion that it may not change their condition. It is based on the aforementioned challenges that this study recommended the need for accountability and transparency in the official conduct of public servants in Nigeria to restore public trust. There is also need for a paradigm shift from the hitherto class design policies to an all inclusive approach in which democratic institutions and citizens will play a determinant role on what forms the policies of the Nigerian State.

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