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Government Policies and Social Welfare: An Examination of the Nigerian Context

Abel Ehizojie Oigbochie, PhD[1], Saji George, PhD[2]

[1,2]Nile University of Nigeria, Abuja

ABSTRACT: This study examines the relationship between government policies and social welfare in Nigeria, with a focus on how state intervention has addressed the welfare needs of the citizenry. Social welfare remains a critical aspect of governance, encompassing areas such as health care, education, poverty alleviation, housing, and social protection. Despite numerous policies and programs introduced by successive Nigerian governments, citizens continue to face widespread poverty, inequality, and inadequate access to basic services. This research explores the extent to which government policies have improved welfare outcomes. Identify the challenges of effective implementation and highlight the gap between policy formulation and practical results. Relying on the qualitative method, the study evaluates the effectiveness of selected welfare initiative and their impact on the citizens' quality of life. Findings are expected to provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of Nigeria's welfare policy framework and recommendations for more inclusive and sustainable welfare delivery.

KEYWORDS: social welfare, social protection, welfare policy, welfare implementation

1. INTRODUCTION

The provision of social welfare is a fundamental responsibility of a modern welfare state, signifying a government's commitment to ensuring a minimum standard of subsistence and quality of life for its citizens. In Nigeria, a nation characterized by vast resources yet grappling with significant poverty and infrastructural deficits, the administration of social welfare services is a critical area of study. The literature explores social welfare as a multi-faceted concept encompassing policies, programs, and services designed to alleviate distress, reduce poverty, and improve the overall well-being of individuals, families, and communities, particularly vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, and the disabled. As such, this paper conceptualized social welfare and policy. The study examined the reasons for the adoption of various social welfare programmes, including the factors leading to their failure. Hence study is an attempt to discuss government and social welfare using the Nigerian context.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING SOCIAL WELFARE

Oyekunle (2023) discusses social welfare administration in Nigeria by categorizing it into three key functional perspectives: the restoration of compromised social functioning, the provision of individual and communal resources for enhanced social functioning, and the prevention of social disorder or dysfunction. The significance of social welfare administration is crucial for any society aspiring for a developing, peaceful community aimed at the overall advancement of its citizens. Egwuonwu (2021) defines social welfare simply as the general well-being of society, which is optimal when the majority of its citizens experience acceptable conditions. He further suggests that the welfare of a society can be evaluated based on its citizens' political and economic rights.

Chigozi (2018), referencing definitions from various sources, views social welfare services as a structured system that provides social services and institutions. These services are intended to help individuals and groups achieve satisfactory standards in life, health, and relationships, allowing them to fulfill their potential while meeting the needs of their families and the community. For Woodsite and McClam (2002), social services focus on assisting those who cannot care for themselves, while the National Open University of Nigeria (2004) emphasizes the alleviation of poverty in its numerous forms.

Badru (2015), as cited in Ndema (2022), posits that social welfare embodies the philosophy that drives governmental policies aimed at safeguarding the welfare of the populace. This usually focuses on mitigating poverty's adverse effects and protecting vulnerable groups' rights to decent work, secure employment, pensions, and a safe future for youth and the elderly. It functions as an approach to bring government assistance closer to society's most vulnerable.

Ndema (2022), building on Badru's ideas along with those of Roland (1990) and Hassan & Ahmed (2015), defines social welfare as the collective efforts by governments and organizations to alleviate the suffering of helpless individuals unable to meet their basic needs through their labor or family support. Roland (1990) notes that the extent and definition of social welfare can vary significantly between countries and societies, influenced by class mobility and differing access to resources.

Hassan & Ahmed (2015) describe social welfare as an institutional framework composed of policies, laws, and governmental (public) agencies that distribute a defined minimum of social services, benefits, and consumption rights based on non-market criteria to support individuals, families, and groups. According to Elekwa (2019), social welfare functions can be categorized into remedial, developmental, supportive, and preventive. Lastly, Nipoyen et al. (2021) state that the primary goal of social welfare policies is poverty reduction, while Antai & Anam (2014) contend that despite substantial efforts by various governments to implement social welfare policies, poverty remains a persistent issue.

2.2 Conceptualizing Policy

The definition of policy has attracted a mixed bag of interpretations from various scholars. This diversity in definitions often depends on the perspective from which each scholar approaches the concept.

A policy is essentially a formal guideline that defines an organization's principles, rules, and procedures for specific activities or behaviors. These policies are crucial for ensuring consistency, compliance, and effective decision-making within the organization. They serve as a framework for managing various aspects, such as employee behavior, operational processes, and interactions with external stakeholders.

Public policy, as described by Jhndal (2023), consists of the framework of laws, regulations, and actions that governments implement to reach social and economic objectives. It reflects the government's commitment to addressing particular issues and influences the decisions made by officials and agencies, thereby impacting society, the economy, and political dynamics. Public policy spans a wide range of critical issues, including economic initiatives, social welfare, education, healthcare, and environmental considerations. Influenced by political ideologies, societal values, and economic conditions, public policy is essential for shaping a nation’s future and addressing societal challenges effectively.

According to the Food Agriculture Organisation (2023), policy represents a clear course or method of action chosen by governments, institutions, or individuals amidst various alternatives, aimed at guiding current and future decisions. The CDC (2024) further emphasizes that policy encompasses laws, regulations, procedures, administrative actions, and voluntary practices that reflect the decisions made by governments and other entities, often illustrated by resource allocation. As network management has grown more intricate due to diverse systems and distributed applications, the concept of policy has evolved to help ease management challenges, though its application varies across research and industry fields.

Fiveable (2025) notes that government policies are decisions aimed at influencing or regulating various aspects of society, which include migration, settlement patterns, and demographic changes. These policies can either promote or restrict movement and shape land use, thus affecting the population's structure and dynamics. Understanding these policies is vital in analyzing their impact on individuals and communities.

Adeniran Muraina Ilugbami and Adeniran (2023) reference Galli (2015) in defining government policy as both a declaration of goals and a negotiated outcome of execution. Characterized by its instability, government policy often lacks clear beginnings or endings, likened to seashells or jelly (Ashmore et al., 2020).

Falk and Tally (2016) identify key features of government policy, such as the intended direction policymakers wish to guide the public and the indication of how resources will be utilized (Díaz-Llamas et al., 2023). Oyadiran and Akintola (2014) point out that various variables, including the legislators involved and constitutional considerations, can shape the government policy process, emphasizing the need for politicians to address crucial issues.

In examining the underlying presumptions of government policies, Macheridis and Paulsson (2019) highlight that these policies stem from assumptions about governmental capabilities and the expected outcomes of actions, which intrinsically carry political implications (Mellaard and van Meijl, 2017). Maggetti and Gilardi (2016) argue that thorough explanations of these assumptions are rare, stressing that every policy process presupposes a certain theory or model (McCann and Ward, 2013).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW /THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Social welfare policies in Nigeria

Some of the major poverty reduction programs in Nigeria were identified by Anas. Nd., since Nigeria’s independence in 1960, particularly highlighting the reasons behind the failure of the National Poverty Eradication Program. Key initiatives include the River Basin Development Authorities (RBDAs), National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP), Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Green Revolution, Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), People’s Bank of Nigeria (PBN), Better Life for Rural Women Programme (BL), Family Support Programme/Family Economic Advancement Programme (FSP/FEAP), Poverty Alleviation Programme/National Poverty Eradication Programme (PAP/NAPEP), and the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). Maryam Babangida and Maryam Abacha were instrumental in promoting gender-specific poverty reduction

through the BL and FSP/FEAP programs, which were designed to provide affirmative action for women. However, the persistent increase in the country's poverty rate indicates that these programs did not achieve their desired outcomes (Obadan, 2002).
Considering the extensive nature of poverty reduction initiatives in Nigeria, it is insightful to focus on the programs implemented during the Fourth Republic, specifically since the return to democracy in 1999. This includes the National Poverty Eradication Programme, the Subsidy Reinvestment Program, and the National Poverty Investment Program.

3.1.1The National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP)

The National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP) was established in 2001 as part of a reorganization from the Poverty Alleviation Program (PAP), which originated in 1999. NAPEP aimed to create a minimum of 200,000 jobs in the labor market each year and involved the collaboration of fourteen ministries, including those focused on agriculture, education, water resources, and health. The initiative concentrated on four main areas: youth empowerment, rural infrastructure development, social welfare, and natural resource development and conservation. This shift from "poverty alleviation" to "poverty eradication" may have been influenced by the need to align Nigeria's efforts with UN mandates against extreme poverty and hunger (Anas nd.,).
According to Babayo, Umar, and Yahaya (2019), in Kpakol (2007), NAPEP is focused on eradicating absolute poverty among the populace. It serves as the leading Federal Government policy responsible for coordinating and monitoring poverty eradication initiatives across all levels of government, while also introducing new strategies for poverty alleviation through collaboration with the private sector.
The structure of the scheme, as described by Babayo, Umar, and Yahaya (2019) and drawing on Ajegi's (2002) arguments, integrates six distinct sectoral schemes. The first, the Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), focuses on offering unemployed youth opportunities for skills acquisition, employment, and wealth generation. The second scheme, known as the Capacity Acquisition Programme (CAP), aims to provide targeted segments of the affected population with training in various skills, facilitating self-reliance. The third scheme, the Mandatory Attachment Programme (MAP), seeks to establish a foundation for credit and training in trade and commerce. The fourth initiative is the Rural Infrastructure Development Scheme (RIDS), which aims to address the infrastructure needs in transport, energy, water, and communication, particularly in rural areas. This scheme is further divided into four components: the Rural Transport Programme, Rural Water Programme, and Rural Communication Programme.
Next is the Social Welfare Services Scheme (SOWESS), which aspires to deliver basic social services such as quality primary and special education, enhance the economic capacity of farmers, and ensure primary health care access. Lastly, the Natural Resources Development and Conservation Scheme (NRDCS) aims to foster participatory and sustainable development in agriculture, mineral, and water resources.

3.1.2 The Subsidy Reinvestment Programme (SURE-P)

In 2015, the regime of former President Goodluck Jonathan introduced the subsidy reinvestment program Sure-P. The administration of social protection programmes was categorized into protective and preventive thresholds. The protective measures, as cited by the World Bank in Atakpa (2024), included social assistance tools such as cash and food transfers, fee waivers for specific social services, education subsidies, and school feeding initiatives. Conversely, the preventive measures comprised social insurance packages that featured premium waivers, health insurance services, subsidized risk-pooling mechanisms, and the provision of basic community services. These initiatives were predominantly executed through the Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P), which was instituted following the removal of fuel subsidies in January 2012. The SURE-P programmes encompassed a variety of services, including Maternal and Child Health (MCH), Community Services, Employment schemes, Mass Transit Programmes, Vocational Training, and Road Works and Rail Transport (Atakpa, 2024).
SURE-P, in the views of Obilor and Njoku (2021), aimed to invest the savings from the removal or reduction of the fuel subsidy into critical areas such as infrastructural development and job creation, ultimately addressing the rising youth unemployment in Nigeria. This initiative encompassed various programs under the Social Safety Net schemes, including the Graduate Internship Scheme (GIS), Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and the Community Service, Women and Youth Empowerment (CSWYE) programs, designed to foster youth development. Additionally, it involved significant infrastructure projects like the Niger-Delta Development Project, improvements in road and rail transport, water and agricultural initiatives, selected power projects, petroleum initiatives by NNPC, and ICT projects that aimed to create an enabling environment for economic activities and innovation (The SURE-P annual report, 2012).
According to the Center for Social Justice (CSJ) (2014), SURE-P focused on Social Safety Nets and Infrastructure Upgrade. This included the Community Service, Women and Youth Employment Programme, Graduate Internship Programme, maternal and child health interventions to enhance healthcare service delivery, conditional cash transfers, health facility upgrades, and supplies of drugs and equipment, along with communications and advocacy efforts. The public works component, anchored by FERMA, along with Technical and Vocational Education and Training, and the Mass Transit programme, was also pivotal. Additionally, the Roads and Railways component of SURE-P was reviewed, highlighting the program's performance and observations.

3.3.3 The National Social Investment Programme (NSIP)

More recently, the National Social Investment and Empowerment Program emerged. Atakpa (2024) outlined its origins, stating that in 2016, during President Muhammadu Buhari's administration, the Nigerian Federal Government established the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) to combat poverty and hunger among vulnerable groups, including children, youth, and women. The ambitious goal was to lift 100 million Nigerians out of poverty within ten years, with the government allocating 500 billion naira for this initiative. The program consisted of four sub-programs targeting specific groups: (i) the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme, (ii) N-Power, (iii) Conditional Cash Transfer Programme, and (iv) Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme. Moreover, the Federal Government integrated its social protection initiatives under the National Health Insurance Scheme and the In-Care of the Poor (COPE) program, which focused on indigent households, especially those led by women, the elderly, and vulnerable individuals like those with HIV/AIDS or fistula. This approach extended to children of school age, offering healthcare fee waivers for expectant mothers and under-fives, supported by the MDGs, and included the relaunched Community-Based Health Insurance Scheme (CBHIS) in 2011.

At the level of the state governments, social protection programmes during the review period included labour market programmes, social insurance programmes, social assistance and welfare programmes, microfinance initiatives, and interventions focused on child protection, survival, development, and health. By the middle of 2023, which coincided with the end of the Muhammadu Buhari administration, several conclusions could be drawn regarding the implementation outcomes of these various social protection measures.

3.2 Motives of Social Welfare Policies in Nigeria

According to the UNICEF (2025) Nigeria is beset by high levels of disparity in terms of access to social services and income distribution. Disparities are socio-economic, linked among others to types of employment and levels of education of the parents, as well as geographic, mainly between North and South, and between rural and urban areas. Gender inequality is pervasive in Nigeria, in terms of political representation, access to and control over land, credit facilities, technologies, education, and health. Large numbers of people live in poverty, both monetary and multidimensional.

Commenting on the reason behind Nigeria's social protection intervention programs, Atakpa, (2024) stated that they are mainly driven by the government through certain policy frameworks and parameters. The federal government of Nigeria eulogizes the social protection clauses of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria as the basis for its social protection policy drives and programs, which are themselves off-sets of fundamental human rights requirements for equality, inclusivity, security, and dignity of living. For example, Sections 16 and 17 of Chapter 2 of the Constitution make it incumbent on state governments to provide maximum welfare, happiness, and freedom to all citizens based on equality of status, equality of opportunity, and social justice. States are also required to provide food, shelter, a reasonable national living wage, sick benefits, care, and pensions for old age, as well as welfare for those with disabilities. In Section 17, sub-Section 3 (a), the constitution requires that every citizen should be allowed to secure adequate means of livelihood, coupled with the guarantee of suitable employment.

3.3 Challenges of Social Welfare Programs in Nigeria

According to Anas…nd., the NAPEP initiative exemplifies a fundamentally impractical ambition by employing a broad-based approach that loosely targets beneficiaries and operates without specific timelines. To be effective, anti-poverty programs must precisely target distinct groups and regions while adhering to set time frames. Countries that successfully halved their poverty rates by 2015 succeeded because they implemented these strategies.

Poverty manifests differently across groups and geographical locations. In ethnically diverse nations, it often disproportionately affects minority populations. For instance, in 2010, Vietnam’s ethnic minorities, which made up less than 15% of the national population, accounted for 47% of the poor and 68% of those living in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2012). Similarly, in geographically vast nations, like China, poverty tends to be concentrated in mountainous regions. As the distance from the poverty line varies across different demographics and locations, strategically targeting these groups is essential. The universal (broad-based) approach adopted by NAPEP only addresses a fraction of the extensive poverty spectrum in the country. The shift towards a targeted (narrow-based) approach gained momentum in the 1980s, prioritizing affirmative action for specific groups and regions (Mkandawire, 2005 cited in Anas…nd.,).

Tochukwu and Momelu (2024) identified several factors contributing to the failure of Nigeria's social protection programs. A significant challenge is inadequate funding, which leads to limited budget allocations and delayed disbursements, ultimately affecting program implementation. This financial shortfall results in inefficient programs, reduced coverage, and compromised service quality. Additionally, they point out weak institutional capacity within implementing agencies, characterized by a lack of technical expertise, skills, and resources, which hampers effective program planning, monitoring, and evaluation. The lack of coordination among stakeholders is another critical barrier. Issues like fragmentation, duplication of efforts, and restricted information sharing negatively impact program efficiency. They emphasize the need for improved collaboration among government entities, NGOs, and community leaders for successful program outcomes. Furthermore, limited community participation is flagged as a key challenge, with communities often marginally involved in decision-making and program design processes. The study emphasizes the necessity of actively engaging communities, ensuring their needs and perspectives are integral to program implementation.

In a related context, Babayo and Umaru (2019) criticized the prevailing ideological framework, stating that social welfare policies should focus on poverty eradication rather than merely poverty reduction. They argue that the current approach perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty.

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Capital Theory

The theoretical framework guiding this study is the social capital theory. Initially developed by Pierre Bourdieu in 1986 and expanded by Robert Putnam in 1993, social capital theory investigates how social networks, relationships, and norms contribute to collective action and positive social outcomes. It underscores the importance of social connections and trust in fostering social cohesion, cooperation, and resource mobilization within communities.

Putnam (1993) defines social capital as the resources embedded within social networks, including trust, reciprocity, and shared norms, that empower individuals and groups to reach common objectives. The theory suggests that communities with robust social capital are better positioned to tackle social challenges, mobilize resources effectively, and achieve favorable developmental results (Kawachi et al., 1997).

In the context of this study, social capital theory offers a vital framework to comprehend the dynamics and factors influencing the effective implementation of social development programs in Nigeria. It stresses the critical role of social connections, trust, and common values among stakeholders involved in these programs. By evaluating the social capital levels within communities and their effects on program outcomes, this research aims to uncover the mechanisms through which social capital impacts the success of social development initiatives.

Moreover, social capital theory provides insights into how social networks and relationships can promote better coordination, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders. It acknowledges that social capital is essential for overcoming challenges, mobilizing resources, and driving collective action for social change.

By utilizing social capital theory as the theoretical framework, this study intends to investigate the relationship between social capital and the successful execution of social development programs in Nigeria. The aim is to enrich the current body of knowledge by revealing the mechanisms whereby social capital affects program results and offering recommendations for improving the design and implementation of social development initiatives.

5. CONCLUSION

The literature presents a clear consensus: while Nigeria has a long history of social welfare initiatives and has launched ambitious programs to address poverty and improve citizen well-being, the administration of these services remains deeply flawed. The absence of a coherent national policy, pervasive corruption, politicization, and severe infrastructural deficits collectively cripple the state's capacity to deliver on its welfare obligations. This failure not only perpetuates poverty and inequality but also erodes public trust and policy legitimacy, contributing to social unrest and hampering the nation's progress toward sustainable development. The sources recommend a fundamental overhaul, calling for a strong political will to formulate and implement a comprehensive social welfare policy, aggressive anti-corruption measures, improved healthcare and education infrastructure, and a participatory approach that empowers communities to identify and manage their own welfare priorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.Nigeria necessitates a cohesive and unified national welfare framework that clearly defines objectives, responsibilities, and mechanisms for effective implementation. This approach will harmonize the currently fragmented initiatives and ensure continuity across different administrations.

2. Agencies responsible for social welfare programs should be well-equipped with skilled personnel, robust monitoring systems, and enhanced coordination among government ministries, NGOs, and community-based organizations to minimize duplication and improve overall efficiency.

3. Welfare interventions must be specifically tailored to address the unique needs of vulnerable populations, including women, children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities, rather than adopting a broad-based approach that may dilute their effectiveness.

4. Strong anti-corruption frameworks need to be enforced to ensure that welfare funds are utilized for their intended purposes. Independent audits, citizen oversight, and open data initiatives will significantly enhance public trust.

5. Sufficient funding should be allocated to critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and housing. Ensuring the timely disbursement and monitoring of these funds will promote sustainability and measurable impact.

6. Policies should embrace participatory approaches, empowering communities to identify and manage their own welfare priorities. Cultivating social trust and collaboration among stakeholders will lead to improved program outcomes.
7. Welfare policies must align with national economic plans to ensure that social interventions contribute to sustainable growth, job creation, and poverty alleviation.
8. Regular assessment of program performance should be institutionalized, utilizing clear indicators and data-driven methodologies to enhance accountability and guide necessary policy adjustments.
9. Enhanced healthcare facilities, improved educational infrastructure, and focused rural development projects are essential for effective welfare delivery and for bridging the inequality gap between urban and rural areas.
10. A genuine commitment from political leaders is paramount. Without strong leadership and accountability, even the most thoughtfully designed policies will struggle to achieve their objectives.

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