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UNPACKING THE POLITICS OF PALLIATIVES DISTRIBUTION IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES

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Abstract

The distribution of palliatives in Nigeria has emerged as a contentious issue, particularly in the wake of successive national / international crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturns and the recent removal of fuel subsidies in the country. These events heightened the urgency for social safety nets, thrusting palliative measures into the national spotlight as a means of cushioning vulnerable populations from economic shocks. However, the processes surrounding their distribution have raised critical concerns about transparency and fairness. This study accordingly examines the politics underpinning palliative distribution in Nigeria, focusing on

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policy implementation dynamics and the resultant socio-economic outcomes. Key findings of the work reveal a troubling pattern of politicization and elite capture, where palliative programmes were frequently captured for political patronage. Significant inefficiencies characterized the distribution processes, often marred by ostensible poor data management, lack of coordination and minimal community engagement. The study concludes that without transparent and accountable mechanisms, palliative distribution risks deepening existing inequalities and further eroding public trust in governance. It recommends the adoption of fully decentralized implementation frameworks and participatory policy designs involving local stakeholders.

Keywords: Palliatives Distribution, Policy Implementation, Political Patronage, Elite Capture,

Social Protection, Governance Transparency

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of palliatives as a form of government intervention has gained prominence in Nigeria's policy discourse, particularly in response to a series of compounding national / international crises (Olohigbe et al., 2025). From the economic paralysis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic to recurring inflationary pressures and, more recently, the controversial removal of fuel subsidies in the country, the Nigerian government has increasingly resorted to the distribution of palliative support (such as food items, cash transfers and essential goods) as a means to cushion the immediate impact on vulnerable populations (Adinoyi & Kpae, 2023; Salisu et al., 2023). These interventions, while urgent and ostensibly well- intentioned, have come to reflect deeper structural and political dynamics within the country's governance architecture

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Given Nigeria's complex socio-political fabric (marked by stark regional inequalities, pervasive poverty and deep-seated mistrust in public institutions) the equitable and efficient distribution of palliatives is not merely a logistical or administrative challenge; it is a fundamentally political act with far-reaching implications (Uwak et al., 2024). In such a context, the transparency, inclusiveness and fairness of palliative programmes are critical not only to their immediate effectiveness but also to the legitimacy of the state and the broader social contract. However, mounting evidence suggests that palliative distribution has frequently been marred by opacity, politicization and elite manipulation, which in turn have eroded public trust and failed to address the needs of the most affected populations (Uwak et al., 2024)

Despite the centrality of palliatives in recent public discourse, scholarly engagement has often focused on logistical or economic aspects, with insufficient attention to the political undercurrents shaping their implementation. This paper seeks to fill that gap by critically examining the political dynamics that influence palliative distribution in Nigeria, with a particular focus on how policy intentions diverge from practical outcomes. The research is further guided by the following questions:

1. What political factors shape the design and execution of palliative distribution in Nigeria?
2. How do these political dynamics affect the equity, transparency and effectiveness of such interventions?
3. What lessons can be drawn for improving future social protection initiatives?

To answer the above questions, the paper is structured as follows. After this Introduction, the conceptual framework of the work is outlined, covering the concepts of palliatives, policy implementation, political economy and governance. This is followed by the paper's theoretical framework: the political economy of policy implementation. Next is the political context of palliatives in Nigeria, then the section on policy

formulation and implementation processes and further analysis of outcomes and discrepancies. There is the section on implications and recommendations, and finally a conclusion. A qualitative research methodology is adopted for the paper as this still allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the structural and human dimensions of the issue, combining rich contextual insights with necessary validation.

Conceptual Framework

A clear understanding of key concepts is essential to ground the analysis of palliative distribution in Nigeria. The following definitions therefore provide a conceptual foundation for the study, beginning with the concept of palliatives. And so, in the context of public policy, palliatives refer to temporary relief measures provided by governments or institutions, to mitigate the immediate effects of economic hardship, social disruption or public emergencies (Uwak et al., 2024). These measures often include food items, cash transfers, health support and subsidies aimed at cushioning vulnerable populations during crises. Then in Nigeria, palliatives have become a prominent policy tool in response to events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recessions and the removal of fuel subsidies in the country.

Policy implementation is another concept that requires elucidation. It is in this paper, the process through which governmental decisions and plans are translated into actionable programmes and services. It further involves the mobilization of resources, institutions, actors and procedures to achieve stated policy objectives (Amakiri & Arugu, 2025). Effective policy implementation requires coordination, transparency and accountability across different levels of governance. Next is political economy, which refers to the study of how political forces, institutions and power dynamics interact with economic systems and influence the allocation of resources. It emphasizes the role of interests, incentives and institutional arrangements in shaping policy outcomes (Okeke & Idike,

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2016). Applying a political economy lens to palliative distribution allows for a critical examination of how power relations, elite interests and informal networks mediate access to state resources.

The concept of governance is also highlighted in this work. Governance essentially encompasses the structures, processes and norms through which public authority is exercised and decisions are made, implemented and such public authorities held accountable (Kjaer, 2023). Invariably, good governance is characterized by transparency, participation, rule of law, equity and responsiveness. Incidentally in the Nigerian context, governance challenges such as corruption, politicization and weak oversight mechanisms often undermine the delivery and credibility of social interventions like palliatives.

The foregoing concepts collectively provide the analytical tools for understanding the intersection of politics, policy and policy outcomes in the distribution of palliatives in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

To further guide the analysis of palliative distribution in Nigeria, this study adopts the political economy of policy implementation as its theoretical framework. The approach emphasizes that policy outcomes are not solely the result of technical planning or administrative execution; rather, they are deeply shaped by the interplay of power, interests, institutions and political interventions within a given socio-political context (Boettke & Powell, 2021; Chukwuma, 2021). This theoretical framework draws from a convergence of political science, economics and public administration. It seeks to understand how political and economic forces interact to influence the trajectory of public policy from design to execution. The theory actually emerged in response to the realization that technical or rational models of policy-making often fail to explain why good policies produce poor outcomes, especially in contexts marked by institutional fragility, power asymmetries and entrenched interests.

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One of the earliest influences on this tradition was Grindle (1980). Grindle argued that implementation cannot be divorced from the political context in which it occurs. She emphasized that policies are filtered through a "context of implementation," shaped by institutional structures, political actors and the allocation of power and resources. According to Grindle, the failure of policy is often not in its formulation but in the contestation, negotiation and manipulation that occur during implementation. Another foundational figure was Bates (1981) who introduced a political economy perspective to the analysis of state policies in developing countries. Bates demonstrated how policy decisions are often driven not by developmental logic but by the strategic interests of political elites who seek to maintain power through patronage and clientelism. Lipsky (1980) also contributes to this body of theory by emphasizing the role of front-line implementers, such as local officials and bureaucrats, who exercise discretion in ways that reflect broader power dynamics, institutional constraints and personal incentives. While Lipsky's work is more grounded in administrative behavior, it complements the political economy approach by highlighting the everyday politics embedded in policy delivery.

More contemporary contributions include the work of Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan (2014) which deepens the analysis in African contexts. They explore how formal and informal norms, political clientelism and bureaucratic improvisation shape policy implementation in Africa, providing critical insights into the disconnect between official policies and ground realities. Together, these theorists underscore a common theme: implementation is a deeply political process, subject to contestation by actors with varying levels of power and divergent interests. This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where policy spaces are often dominated by elite bargains, informal networks and regional power struggles. In such settings, the political economy of policy implementation offers a robust analytical tool to unpack why interventions such as palliative distribution are susceptible to politicization, inefficiency and inequitable outcomes, despite their stated intentions of providing relief to the most vulnerable.

At its core therefore, the political economy of policy implementation theory posits that even well-designed policies can fail or be distorted during implementation due to competing political agendas, bureaucratic interests, informal networks and rent-seeking behavior (Oye & Adams, 2024). Policies, especially the ones involving resource redistribution such as palliatives, tend to become arenas of contestation where elites, other politicians and bureaucrats seek to advance personal or political gains, often at the expense of policy effectiveness or equity.

Applying this theory to Nigeria reveals a political landscape where state institutions often operate within a framework of patronage and elite capture. The distribution of public goods, including palliatives is thus frequently mediated by informal political arrangements and ruling class considerations. Rather than being neutral tools of welfare, palliatives then become politicized commodities used to reward loyalty, secure electoral support or reinforce clientelism. Thus, the political economy of policy implementation provides a lens through which to critically interrogate why palliative programmes in Nigeria are prone to inefficiency, favoritism and inequity. It moves the analysis beyond normative assumptions of policy failure to uncover the structural and political logics that govern state action (or inaction) in the realm of social protection.

The Political Context of Palliatives in Nigeria

Understanding the political dynamics that underpin the distribution of palliatives in Nigeria requires a historical, structural and contextual exploration of social welfare practices and the crises that have shaped recent interventions. Then indeed, the concept of social welfare in Nigeria has traditionally oscillated between informal community-based support systems and formal state-driven interventions. In the pre-colonial era, social support was rooted in kinship, communalism and extended family networks. Colonial administration introduced some elements of formal welfare, particularly

through missionary-led education and health services, though these were often uneven and urban-centered (Imam, 2012).

Post-independence Nigeria saw the expansion of state-led welfare programmes, especially under military regimes, with initiatives such as the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), the Better Life for Rural Women Programme and the Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF). However, these efforts were often short-lived, poorly managed or plagued by political interference. Social protection did not become a structured national agenda until the early 2000s, with the introduction of frameworks like the National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP) under the Buhari administration. Yet, even these programs have faced persistent criticism over politicization and exclusion (Dibua, 2016; Muanya & Ugoeze , 2019; TheCable, 2023).

As a matter of fact, two major national crises significantly elevated the prominence of palliatives as an urgent governmental response: the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the removal of fuel subsidies in 2023. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the federal and state governments initiated emergency food distribution, cash transfers and support for vulnerable populations. However, the process was widely criticized for lack of transparency, hoarding, politicization and an absence of reliable beneficiary databases. The End SARS protests in October 2020 revealed stockpiles of undistributed palliatives in government warehouses, further eroding public trust (Obiezu, 2020).

In 2023 also, following the abrupt removal of fuel subsidies by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Nigeria faced another wave of inflation, hardship and mass discontent. The government announced a series of palliative measures, including N5 billion supports to each state, provision of grains and fertilizers and proposed cash transfers (Izuaka, 2023). However, the structural weaknesses exposed during COVID-19 persisted, with issues of elite capture, distribution inequities and the use of palliatives as political leverage becoming evident (Punch Newspapers, 2023).

In Nigeria's federal system, the responsibility for social protection is shared across three tiers of government. The federal government initiates most palliative policies; funds bulk interventions and provides general guidelines through ministries and agencies like the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs. The state governments adapt and implement these policies based on local dynamics, often determining the actual beneficiaries and disbursement procedures. The local governments, though constitutionally closest to the people, frequently play a marginal role due to limited autonomy, financial constraints and political subjugation to state executives (Olanipekun, 2024). This layered structure creates both opportunities for tailored responses and vulnerabilities for manipulation. So that without a centralized accountability system or intergovernmental coherence, palliative distribution is often compromised by inefficiency, fragmentation and competing political interests.

In addition, Nigeria's political landscape is deeply shaped by identity politics (Moshood, & Orunbon, 2024). Ethnic, religious and regional affiliations frequently influence policy formulation, access to public resources and perceptions of fairness (Aboi, 2024). Palliatives, being tangible and immediate forms of state largesse, are particularly susceptible to these influences. In many cases therefore, political leaders distribute palliatives through partisan networks, favouring supporters or constituencies aligned with ruling parties. Ethnic and regional sentiments also colour distribution patterns, especially where national cohesion is fragile. Religious affiliations further complicate matters, with some interventions perceived as biased or exclusionary, especially in multi-faith states (Fatunmole, 2024; Ibrahim, 2024; Oyekola, 2024).

In summary, the political context of palliative distribution in Nigeria is shaped by a long history of uneven welfare provision, crisis-triggered interventions, intergovernmental contestations and the enduring issue of exclusion. These factors collectively hinder the realization of equitable, transparent and effective policy outcomes and they call for urgent institutional and systemic reforms.

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Policy Formulation and Implementation Processes

A critical examination of the politics of palliatives distribution in Nigeria necessitates an understanding of how policies are officially formulated and translated into action. Essentially, palliative distribution in Nigeria is generally governed by ad hoc or emergency-response frameworks rather than long-term, institutionalized social protection systems. Most frameworks are developed in reaction to specific crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2023 fuel subsidy removal (Falaju, 2023; Social Action, 2023, The Guardian Nigeria, 2023). The Federal Government often issues policy directives through the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, supported by agencies like the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). These frameworks outline broad objectives, categories of beneficiaries and basic modalities for distribution but often lack detailed operational guidelines or accountability mechanisms. In practical terms, the formulation and execution of palliative distribution policies involve a wide range of stakeholders, each with varying degrees of influence and responsibility as follows:

- Federal Government Ministries and Agencies, including the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and NEMA, responsible for policy design, coordination and oversight.
- State and Local Governments: Play key roles in adapting policies to local contexts, compiling beneficiary lists and managing distribution.
- Political Parties and Politicians: Frequently involved in mobilizing palliative programmes for political patronage or electoral gain, often blurring the line between state resources and partisan interests.
- Traditional Rulers and Religious Leaders: Serve as community gatekeepers who help identify beneficiaries and facilitate grassroots distribution, especially in rural or trust-sensitive areas.
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Donors: Participate in supplementing state efforts, monitoring implementation and

occasionally leading independent initiatives. (Falaju, 2023; Social Action, 2023, the Guardian Nigeria, 2023).

The actual implementation structures typically operate through multi-layered committees or task forces, established at federal, state and local government levels. These bodies are expected to handle coordination, storage, movement of goods and actual distribution. However, these structures often suffer from overlapping roles, weak coordination, lack of clear lines of accountability and susceptibility to political capture (NAN, 2020). In some cases, digital platforms are introduced for disbursement (e.g., for cash transfers), but infrastructural and data limitations (especially in rural areas) hinder their effectiveness. Moreover, reliance on manual compilation of beneficiary lists, often influenced by local political actors, compromises the integrity and reach of these mechanisms.

What may be described as palliative budgeting is often non- transparent, with limited public access to detailed expenditure reports. While federal allocations (such as the N5 billion per state announced after the 2023 subsidy removal) are publicized, disbursement and utilization at state and local levels are rarely subject to robust oversight (Jimoh, 2024). Logistics, including procurement, transportation, warehousing and last-mile delivery, are major bottlenecks. Poor infrastructure, coupled with corruption and lack of planning, results in significant delays, spoilage and diversion of materials (NAN, 2020). Targeting frameworks are frequently based on unclear or outdated poverty registers. In many instances, beneficiaries are selected through politically motivated lists rather than objective need assessments, thereby undermining the principle of equity and inclusion.

Overall therefore, while Nigeria's policy formulation and implementation processes for palliatives appear great on paper, they are frequently undermined by fragmented coordination, politicization and institutional weaknesses. The absence of standardized operational guidelines, coupled with weak monitoring, continues to compromise the credibility and impact of palliative interventions across the country (The

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Guardian Nigeria, 2023). Many a time in frustration, the citizens freely help themselves with the palliatives distribution as illustrated in Figure I.

Figure I. Citizens Freely Helping Themselves over Palliatives Distribuion

Source: Matazu (2020)

Further Analysis of Outcomes and Discrepancies

Indeed, a critical dimension of unpacking the politics of palliatives distribution in Nigeria lies in assessing the actual outcomes of policies against their stated objective (Guardian Editorial (2023). While the official

rhetoric often emphasizes inclusivity, urgency and compassion for the vulnerable, the implementation process has frequently produced outcomes that diverge significantly from these ideals. Undoubtedly, palliative distribution in Nigeria is typically framed as a social protection mechanism intended to alleviate the suffering of the poorest and most vulnerable during periods of economic distress or national emergency. However, in reality, the outcomes have often failed to match these humanitarian goals. Policies promising broad coverage and equitable relief have frequently resulted in limited reach, administrative confusion and public disillusionment (Dada et al, 2023; Guardian Editorial, 2023). The prevalence of elite capture, where influential individuals or political actors hijack relief distribution for personal or partisan purposes, remains a central concern (The Guardian, September 8, 2023). Public perception of palliative distribution in Nigeria has accordingly, largely remained negative, shaped by widespread reports of inefficiency, corruption and politicization (Jimoh, A. (2024).

The truth then is that palliatives distribution in Nigeria has not occurred in a political vacuum. Instead, it has unfolded within a highly politicized environment where state resources are often mobilized to serve partisan goals rather than public welfare. The politicization of palliative distribution thus continues to have damaging consequences for citizen trust in government (Abayomi, 2024; Aluko, 2020). This erosion of trust further contributes to a fractured social fabric. Then the ensuing intersection of chronic poverty in the country and weak governance creates a fertile ground for policy failures. The occasioning failures are not accidental but reflect deep-seated structural deficiencies. The effect is a paradox where social protection mechanisms designed to alleviate poverty instead reproduce inequality and exclusion, reinforcing the cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

Consequently, empirical evidence from Nigeria aligns closely with the political economy of policy implementation framework. As theorized by Merilee Grindle (1980), public policy implementation occurs within a

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context defined by power struggles, institutional constraints and competing interests. The distribution of palliatives in Nigeria therefore exemplifies how

policy outcomes are shaped less by official intent and more by the informal politics of control. Our findings also resonate with the work of Bates (1981), who argued that state interventions in Africa often reflect elite strategies for maintaining political dominance rather than developmental logic. Similarly, Lipsky's concept of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) is evident in the discretionary role of local actors - party operatives, community leaders and bureaucrats - who shape distribution outcomes based on informal rules and incentives. Thus, the politics of palliative distribution in Nigeria reveals a critical tension between policy as written and policy as practiced.

Implications and Recommendations

Findings of this study reveal significant structural and political distortions in the formulation and implementation of palliative distribution policies in Nigeria. These distortions have continued to undermine the intended goals of equity, relief and public trust. To address these challenges and improve the efficacy and legitimacy of future interventions; this section of the paper offers a set of policy implications and recommendations, with a broader reflection on social protection in fragile democratic settings:

- **Need for Reform in Distribution Mechanisms**

One of the most pressing policy implications is the need to reform the distribution infrastructure through which palliatives are allocated and delivered. Truly speaking, Nigeria currently lacks a credible, unified system for identifying and targeting vulnerable populations. Distribution is often reliant on informal lists compiled by political operatives or local elites, leading to exclusion, duplication and abuse. To remedy this, the government must invest in the development and maintenance of biometric social registries and robust digital platforms for disbursement.

These systems can then enhance transparency, minimize fraud and ensure that assistance reaches genuine beneficiaries in the country. Such technology-driven solutions, when paired with real-time monitoring and verification processes, would not only streamline operations but also shield interventions from political interference.

- **Importance of Decentralization and Accountability Mechanisms**

Centralized palliative programmes have often proven ineffective due to their distance from local realities and inability to adapt to diverse community needs. Decentralization, through empowering local governments and grassroots institutions, can enhance responsiveness and accountability. Furthermore, the design and implementation of palliative policies must include community participation, to ensure that beneficiaries are not merely passive recipients but active stakeholders. Mechanisms such as town hall consultations, community-based beneficiary identification and local oversight committees can enhance both legitimacy and effectiveness. In addition, institutionalized accountability frameworks (including mandatory public disclosure of distribution criteria, independent audits and grievance redress mechanisms) are vital for deterring misuse and promoting public confidence.

- **Role of Civil Society and Independent Monitors**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and independent observers have a crucial role to play in monitoring palliative programmes. In many instances, CSOs have exposed irregularities, documented exclusion, and pushed for reforms in public welfare delivery. Their presence can serve as a counterbalance to state power and a bridge between policymakers and citizens. Government agencies should formally recognize and collaborate with independent monitors, including non-governmental organizations, religious institutions, the academia and the media, to conduct real-time oversight, gather feedback and evaluate impact. Such partnerships can reduce the current opacity surrounding implementation and promote a culture of transparency and accountability.

- **Broader Implications for Social Protection Programmes in Fragile Democracies**

The Nigerian experience offers broader lessons for other fragile democracies where governance institutions are weak, political clientelism is rampant and social safety nets are often politicized. In such contexts, the failure of palliative programmes is not merely administrative; it is a symptom of deeper democratic deficits. Social protection in fragile democracies must therefore be framed not just as economic relief, but as a political project of inclusion and state legitimacy. Effective palliative policies must go beyond short-term emergency relief to form part of a long-term social protection strategy rooted in rights, equity and democratic accountability.

Ultimately however, reforming palliative distribution in Nigeria requires more than technical adjustments. It demands a shift in governance ethos, from patronage to protection, from secrecy to transparency and from elite-centered policymaking to inclusive, participatory development. Such a transformation is vital for rebuilding public trust in public institutions and

reinforcing the foundations of a more resilient and equitable Nigeria.

Conclusion

The politicization of palliative distribution in Nigeria, as critically examined in this paper, underscores the structural and governance challenges that continue to undermine equitable access to social support in times of crisis. While palliatives are designed to cushion vulnerable populations against socio-economic shocks such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2023 fuel subsidy removal, their implementation in Nigeria has often been marked by elite capture, inefficiency, lack of transparency and regional disparities. These outcomes reflect deep-rooted issues in the political economy of policy implementation in a fragile democratic context. To address these shortcomings, there is an urgent need for reform in distribution mechanisms. The Nigerian case highlights the broader

implications for social protection programmes in fragile democracies. The truth is that without deliberate efforts to insulate such interventions from political manipulation, palliatives risk becoming instruments of patronage rather than vehicles of relief and equity.

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