



ASSESSING THE COVID-19 INDUCED STAY AT HOME MEASURE AND SOCIAL DEFIANCE BY THE POOR IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract: The study assessed the COVID-19 induced stay at home measure and social defiance by poor people in Rivers State, Nigeria. To achieve this objective, the study relied on the use of observation and content analysis techniques for data collection. The Marxist Political Economy theory was adopted as a theoretical framework as well as an additional method of data analysis to support the largely thematic approach. Based on this, the study established the fact that the stay at home measure to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Rivers State generated social defiance among poor people who are mostly engaged in informal economic activities such as petty roadside buying and selling as well as unemployed persons who live their lives based on daily income. Hence, the defiance of the ruling class stay at home directive represents a way of gaining socioeconomic balance by the poor masses despite being sandwiched between two evils comprised of the COVID-19 on the one hand and hunger on the other. The study concludes that adopting the western approach of stay at home is impracticable given the massive poverty in the state. Hence, it was recommended that where business by substitution is not feasible, the government should ensure that foodstuffs are effectively distributed to poor households in a sustained manner. This will ensure that people stay at home without unduly risking their lives to engage in nocturnal business to avoid trigger happy security agencies who are charged to enforce the directive.

Keywords: *COVID-19, stay at home, social defiance, poor, Rivers State.*

1.1 Introduction

The fact that the new coronavirus (COVID-19) is entrenching a new world order is no longer something to debate about. Whether we look at this from a policy, economic, social or even religious angle, it is crystal clear that the spread of the virus to 210 countries of the world (Worldometer, 2020), has triggered one of the most unimaginable shocks to the global political economy. While the geographical origin of the virus has been traced to Wuhan, China, the local space where it originated from has been a matter of contention between the Chinese and American governments. In this regard, both governments

have engaged in a balance of power blame-game with China pointing to the wet market (after throwing random accusations at the United States Army and Italy) and the United States of America fingering a Chinese laboratory all in Wuhan as possible places where the virus may have generated from. This obvious power tantrums notwithstanding, the metastatic character of the COVID-19 across many parts of the world has reemphasized the increasing influence of globalization in modern human history with a remorseful reminder of how closely knitted we have become.

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The progressive spread of the coronavirus pandemic has since its outbreak at the end of 2019 (Shereen et al., 2010), caused a significant havoc to the world with global figures put at 3,245,7791 and 229,220 deaths as at the time of writing this paper. Although the virus has managed to establish its deadly footprints in a good number of countries with its trademark of relative death tolls anywhere it nests, America, Italy, Spain, France, Iran, United Kingdom among others remain the hardest hit countries (Duddu, 2020) in the world with a deliberate attempt to avoid the mention of China since it is now standing aloof the pandemic given its reported ability to have contained the disease without necessarily wiping out its unenviable status as the ancestral home of the novel coronavirus.

With the established pressure on global health systems and the massive increase in the loss of lives, the coronavirus now serves as a force of academic gravity with multidisciplinary appeal. This is appreciated in light of the urgency to find lasting cure to the disease as well as vaccines that render humans immune to future attacks. While the World Health Organization (WHO) validates these coordinated scientific race for solutions, in the meantime, global fingertip policy decisions or administrative actions such as the enforcement of lockdowns, stay at home and social or physical distancing requiring significant alterations in human behaviours seem to be the bandwagon approach to containing the spread of the virus. Interestingly, these new norms of behaviour come with grave adverse consequences such as severe economic distress and associated deviance arising from social discontents.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has continued to warn that the global economy will slide into another great depression and that African countries will be had hit (IMF, 2020) either as a result of the direct impact of the virus or due to already established socioeconomic deficits like unemployment and poverty. Nigeria is currently regarded

as the world poverty capital with over 86 million of its population living below the poverty line (Iheonu & Urama, 2019). With this gory evidence of widespread poverty in the country, lockdowns or stay at home measures to combat the spread of the virus clearly presents a difficult task for the Nigerian government. For instance, as at the time of writing this paper, Nigeria has recorded a total of 1,932 confirmed cases with 58 deaths (NCDC, 2020) but has followed the global trajectory of lockdowns and social distancing to curtail the spread of the virus in affected states. As would be expected, this is already having a serious adverse socioeconomic impact on the people with pockets of social resistance and criminal activities here and there to stay apace of the hunger induced by the lockdowns.

Although these measures may be working in places like the United States and Europe due to the highly organized nature of these areas, Africa and indeed Nigeria face peculiar reality as a significant number of the population remain unemployed, homeless or live in crowded houses with an unavoidable sense of communal relationship. This social reality requires extreme political caution to manage and calls for academic inquiry. As a result, this paper examined the link between the COVID-19 induced stay at home measure and social defiance by poor residents in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

This section deals with the clarification of three basic concepts associated with this study. These are COVID-19, stay at home and social defiance. In addition to this, a conceptual framework linking the three concepts is provided to show the analytical relationship between them. *COVID-19*: The term COVID-19 refers to the novel coronavirus disease that originated from Wuhan, China in the later part of 2019. *Stay at home*: This simply refers to government directives to citizens either at the county (local government), state or federal level to remain indoors or in-shelter as a measure to stave the spread of the deadly



coronavirus disease and this has been used interchangeably with lockdowns even though the latter carries a higher degree of government enforceability. *Social defiance*: This refers to the deliberate action by groups of people which

runs contrary to the stay at home directives of government in the attempt to manage the teething hunger associated with the directive.

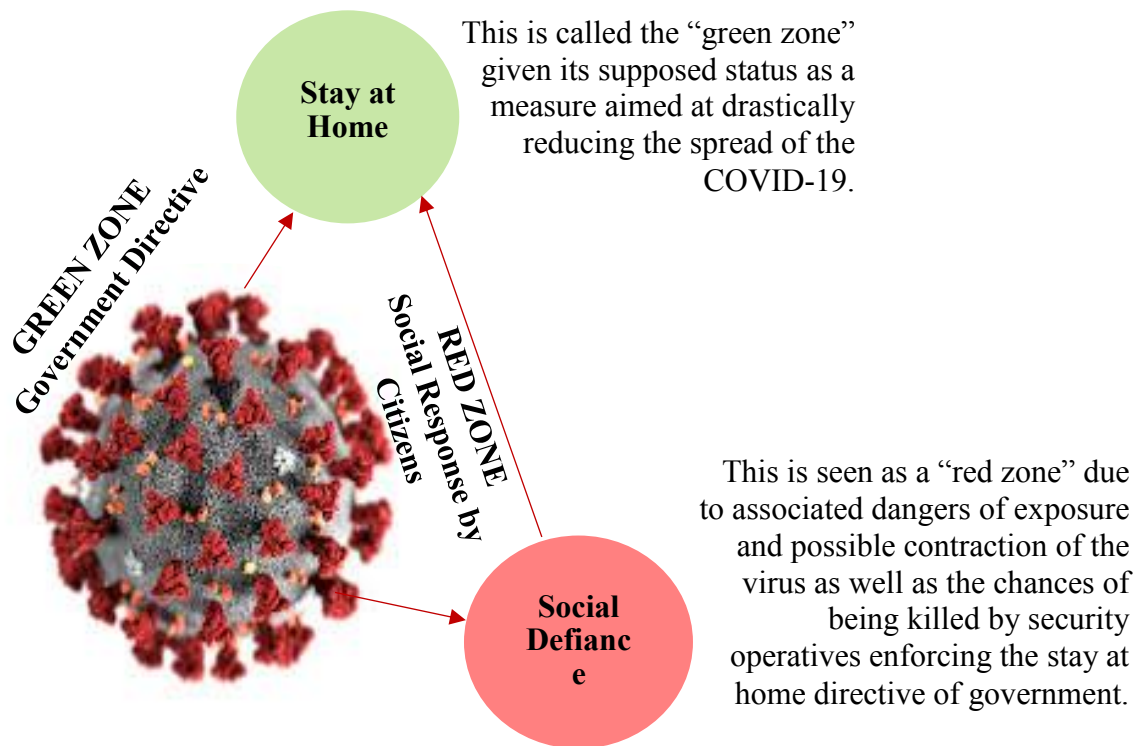




Fig. 1.1: Conceptual link between COVID-19, stay at home and Social defiance

It is important to note as shown in Fig. 1.1 above that while the green zone that marks the government directive to stay at home may be viewed as a healthy step at curbing the spread of the virus, the rise in social defiance which clearly describes the red zone represents a move by groups of people to mitigate the harsh socioeconomic realities that they confront in the course of adhering to such a directive. As we shall explain later, the stay at home measure or directive in a place like Rivers State clearly has contextual adverse socioeconomic implications for mostly poor households who live by a hand-to-mouth method derivable from daily income.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the Marxist Political Economy approach as a way of understanding how policy actions and economic realities associated with the COVID-19 are intricately linked. The Marxist Political Economy (MPE) theory is associated with the popular German Scholar and communist protagonist, Karl Marx. The MPE approach rest on the assumption that the political super-structure is systemically linked to the economic sub-structure or infrastructure of any society. In this regard, the economy clearly defines the political happenings in society and the reverse may actually be the case sometimes. For Marx therefore, the class relations that ensue within the economic sphere of society in which the owners of the means of production perpetually exploit those who own nothing but their labour hands, replicates itself in the political system with a clear extension of visible subjugation of the masses. Hence, the ruling class is in constant and yet unholy alliance with the propertied class in a union that is enabled by the progressive exploitation of the working class. He went further to argue that what sustains this exploitation is ruling class ideology which is almost always visible in policy instruments and enforcements.

However, in recent theoretical modifications of the Marxist political economy approach to social analysis, a reverse social engineering framework has been used to prove that the entire political economy framework could also work differently. In other words, political sub-systems could also define economic sub-system in society (Amundsen, 2010). This extension of the Marxist political economy approach provides a clear indication of the fact that a strong structural relationship exist between the polity and economy. Resting on the theoretical leverage that this provides, it is easy to see how ruling class policies or ideology creates the enabling condition that expands the exploitation and pauperization of the masses in society.

Applied to the research area and the content of the study, it become easily comprehensible when we appreciate the fact that if ruling class directives are doled out, without reviewing the economic implications on the masses, it only ends up frustrating the latter group of people. Hence, the stay at home directive induced by the COVID-19 cases identified in Rivers State without necessarily dealing with the economic conditions of people who mostly rely on daily income generated no other option but social defiance as a way of coping with the progressive hunger associated with such a directive. Thus, the MPE represents a befitting theoretical frame of analysis for a study of this nature.

Method

The setting for this study is Rivers State which is located in the Southern part and the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Indeed, the state is known to be the epicenter of the oil and gas industry since it plays host to several multinational petroleum companies. The design for this study is purely descriptive. The methods of data collection are observation and content analysis techniques. This clearly requires a qualitative method of data analysis and this is done with the help of the thematic method. However, the Marxist



Political Economy approach is also used to further strengthen the data analysis.

Results

The State Response to COVID-19

As earlier stated, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has largely assumed a bandwagon strategy across the world except for pockets of novelty in this regard. The administrative approaches by governments have been partial or total lockdowns or stay at home directives, social distancing and the use of mainstream and social media platforms to educate people on the basic hygiene required to avoid the spread of the virus. In fact, Soludo (2020, par. 3) captured this succinctly when he pointed out that:

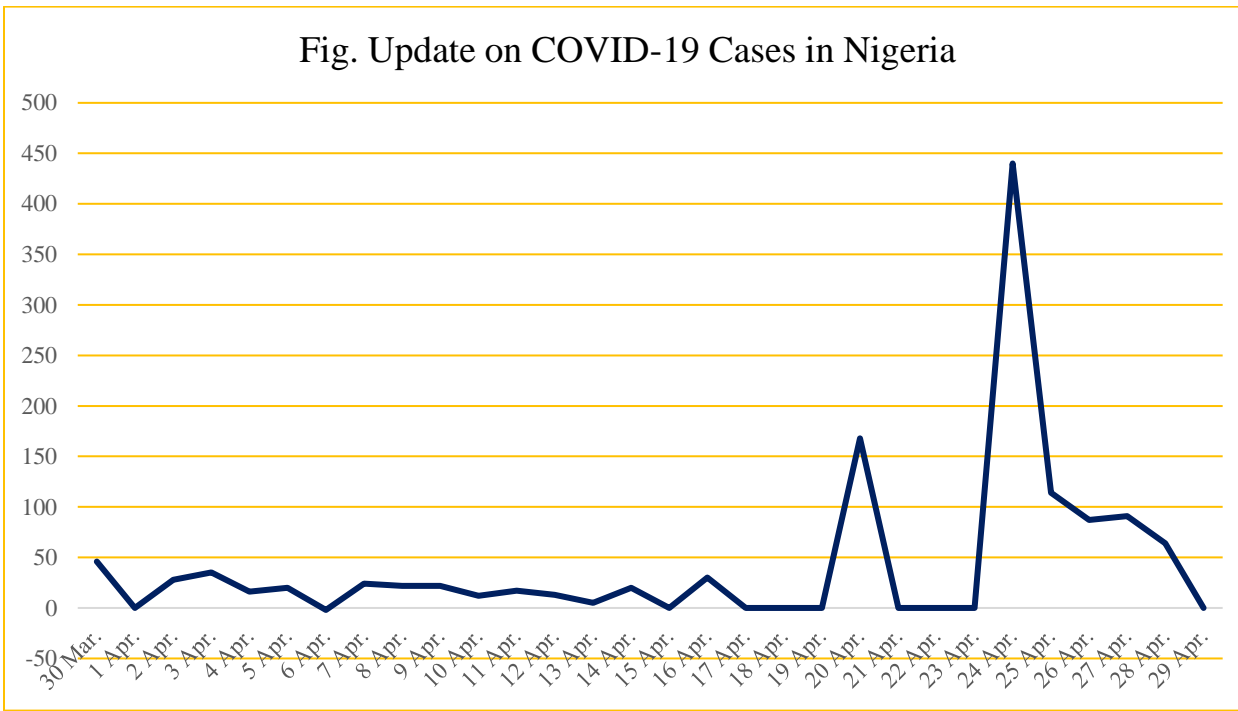
In most western countries, the cocktail of response has included a coterie of defensive measures including: border closure; prepare isolation centres and mobilize medical personnel/facilities; implement stay at home orders or lockdowns except for food, medicine and essential services; campaign for basic hygiene and social distancing; arrange welfare packages for the vulnerable; and also economic stimulus packages to mitigate the effects on the macro economy.

This largely western approach to the global pandemic has been viewed as a strategic template to address the

devastating impact of COVID-19 notwithstanding the variations in social, economic, geographic and even religious differences in other places. Hence, in Nigeria, when the virus was first recorded in Lagos, the familiar administrative spirit of shutting down domestic and commercial areas served as the most attractive measure to reduce its spread. This same approach was adopted by the government of Nigeria in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory with a dovetail of similar response by governors of most states in the country. While, the importation of the western approach to tackling the virus in Nigeria seem to have helped when compared to the manner with which the COVID-19 pandemic has metastasized with its trademark of sorrow, tears and blood in places like Italy, the United States of America, Spain, United Kingdom among others, the general response of the government in Nigeria has been largely questionable. Despite the lockdown and social distancing measures in Nigeria, the number of reported cases of COVID-19 by the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC) continues to rise until recently (NCDC, 2020), even though increasingly mysterious deaths in Kano State in the North Western part of the country may now become a reason to reverse the hope of progress in tackling the deadly virus. Fig. 1.2 below shows the current update on COVID-19 spread since March, 2020 when the first case was recorded in Lagos, Nigeria.



Fig. Update on COVID-19 Cases in Nigeria



Source: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2020

From Fig. 1.1 above, it is clear that the progressive character of incremental cases associated with the deadly coronavirus disease after an index case is registered is also the case with Nigeria despite following the bandwagon approach of stay at home and social distancing measures. Even though the number of persons who contracted the disease reduced significantly from the peak point of 440 to 0 confirmed cases in just five days (between 24th and 29th of April), huge number of unexplained deaths in Kano State (Shuib, 2020) puts pressure on the COVID-19 fatality equation.

The established presence of the virus in Nigeria is no longer a thing of contention. Instead, there has been widespread concern as to whether Nigeria has the health, social as well as economic capacity to sustain the same measures that a more structurally organized western society is adopting to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. The argument is that over the years, these societies have

progressively invested in socioeconomic infrastructure that now enables them to sustain measures such as lockdowns and social distancing in the fight against the pandemic. In the case of Nigeria, long years of infrastructural deficit (Raimi, 2017) occasioned by a weak governance system has clearly shown the nudity of the country in the face of the COVID-19 saga.

As would be expected, the situation is not so different in Rivers State which is the social laboratory of this study. The state currently has 7 confirmed cases and 2 deaths associated with the novel coronavirus pandemic (NCDC, 2020). When the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was registered in the state, the governor quickly read the riot act with the familiar lines of lockdowns and social distancing without any concern for the socio-economic character of the state especially in terms of the dominance of informal market systems and a pedestrian livelihood scenario that is characterized by a population of people



who depend on daily income for their survival. Clearly, the stay at home measure in a place like Rivers State where most of the markets are littered around major streets and motor-park zones will definitely present a herculean task to manage. In addition, most parts of the state like Diobu, Mile 1 to 3 and Town Market axis among others present a clustering of low income households where an endless communal style living equally pose significant threat to the stay at home and social distancing measures. This scenario in the state corroborates the position of Hundeyin (2020), who argued that:

Social distancing in most parts of Africa will remain impractical. From the shanties in South Africa's townships to the crowded Ajengule or Mararaba in Abuja/Nasarawa, or Cairo or Kinshasa to the villages and poor neighbourhoods in much of Africa, social clustering, not distancing, is the affordable, survivalist culture. Communal living is not just about culture, it is a matter of economic survival (par. 3).

Despite this peculiar social scenario in the State, the imported western approach to combating the novel coronavirus has prevailed with progressive extension of lockdowns or stay at home directives. As highlighted above, the decision to lockdown the state and enforce social distancing measures may have helped to reduce the potency of the virus in terms of spreading, but the social consequences of this approach have been rather grave especially with regard to hunger and rising cases of criminality. By far the most troubling is the competing scenario where hunger poses more threat to the people than the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led to widespread social defiance as people continue to disobey the stay at home directive not necessarily because they want to, but due to the fact that if they do not, they are bound to face a bitter encounter with a more deadly virus called hunger.

How the Poor are Defying the Stay at Home Order

The deployment of lockdown/stay at home and social distancing directives by the Rivers State government to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus with its huge appetite for human life has been met with widespread social defiance by different informal economic groups in the state. The reason for this social defiance is not so much that people want to disobey the government's directive, but given the livelihood condition of mostly poor people in the state, defying the state directive to stay at home becomes an inevitable evil. In the face of economic backwardness coupled with a strong deficit in basic infrastructure such as electric power and water supply, it is particularly a comic relief scenario to think that people can be forced to stay at home. These adverse socio-infrastructure condition is further exacerbated by the poor living conditions of most residents of the state who live from hand to mouth or depend on daily market systems for their sustenance. The situation in Rivers State represents a facsimile of majority of the other states in Nigeria like Lagos, Abuja among others where the virus has its footprints. According to Hundeyin (2020), in a place, where a significant number of people live in extreme poverty, the stay at home directive is a ludicrous strategy because in such places, the principal issues in tackling the pandemic are not in fact medical, but economic and social.

Thus while developed countries like the United States of America and the United Kingdom are known to have the capacity to sustain measures such as lockdowns and social distancing, it is clearly impracticable in a place like Rivers State, Nigeria. This is especially so because of the presence of a large population of unemployed residents in mostly the center of Port Harcourt, the capital city of the state. This is further complicated by the massive number of uneducated people who live in peripheral dwelling places around the city centre who have no clue as to the reason for the stay at home directive or even about the virus itself. Most people do not even believe that any thing called COVID-19 exist let alone stay at home as a way of



mitigating its spread. Again, in terms of awareness, the knowledgeable population in Rivers State when compared to that associated with western societies where stay at home measure was imported from, it becomes easy to understand why there are pockets of social defiance of this directive here and there in the state.

The act of social defiance with regard to the COVID-19 stay at home directive of the Rivers State government spreads across several sub-sectors of the informal economy. Thus, while the government continues to extend the lockdown or stay at home order with new timelines as common in western societies, the different players in the informal economic sub-sector of the state continue to devise new strategies to defy this directive. For instance, petty roadside market men and women seem to be at the zenith of the social defiance ladder as they continue to dare the government by coming out to trade in droves even when they have been asked to stay at home. It has been observed that several market women and men prefer to come out to trade undermining whether they can contract the virus on the grounds that they prefer to die by the virus than to die as a result of hunger. Even the deployment of armed security taskforce to enforce the governments stay at home directive could not deter this category of people from defying the directive. In most cases, we find cases where markets were shut down during the day only to reopen in the early hours of the morning between 03:00 am and 06:30 am, Nigerian time with people engaged in a communal-styled buying and selling with little or no regard for social distancing. This goes a long way to show that this group of street traders cannot afford to stay at home since their livelihood depends on the daily income they make from such markets.

The above reality has shown that poverty is a major driver of social defiance with regard to the stay at home measure of curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Other categories of people who continue to defy the stay at home order do so for the same reason that pulls street marketers

out of their homes. For instance, the unemployed and mostly homeless people who rely on daily stipends from motor-parks continue to pose a threat to the stay at home directive. This is quite understood given that most of them do not have their own homes and where they do, the enabling infrastructure required to make their lives meaningful such as power supply and water are not readily available to at least keep them at home. According to Hundayin (2020), in Nigeria, only eight percent of the population earn at least N60,000 and above monthly, which is less than a quarter of what the United Kingdom (UK) considers to be its poverty line and besides, residents in the UK also have access to high quality accommodation, healthcare, 24-hour power supply, pipe-borne water and gas, and cheap high speed internet connections. All of these amenities continue to be a mirage in a place like Nigeria and indeed Rivers State with significant adverse implication for the stay at home directive.

This is perhaps why the act of social defiance has necessitate the use of brutal force to enforce the stay at home order in several parts of Nigeria. Although only one (1) human death has been recorded in Rivers State as a result of the highhandedness of the security operatives charged with enforcing the directive (Obe, 2020), there are tales of brutality and outright seizure of goods worth thousands of Naira from pedestrian and other petty traders whose only means of survival come from the sale of these goods. However, it has been reported that about eighteen (18) persons have been killed in other parts of the country as a result of the attempt to enforce the stay at home directive by overzealous security operatives. As Hundayin (2020) observed, at latest count, 58 people have died through the COVID-19 virus in Nigeria, while police and military brutality stemming from the lockdown has already killed no fewer than 18 persons across the country (Reuters, 2020). This shows that people who are poor will continue to respond negatively to the stay at home directive as hunger puts pressure on their stomachs. This is why



Broadbent (2020), is of the opinion that lockdown has immediate ramifications for individuals who live on a hand-to-mouth basis, and for their networks of dependents because if people cannot eat, they will not obey a lockdown; nor is there any reason, practical or moral, for them to do so.

Without pointing out the place of corruption among security agencies and government officials in undermining the stay at home directive of the government of Rivers State, it is important to add that this western-styled measure of combatting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is largely antithetical especially because of widespread poverty. Stay at home directives will continue to put economic pressure on the informal sector participants because they live on a hand-to-mouth basis daily. Apart from this, the lockdown and or stay at home measure has created a market scenario where the prices of foodstuffs have skyrocketed with many poor people unable to afford their daily meals. The end result of this is the clash between economic conditions and the political decisions of the ruling class which has obviously lead to social defiance by the poor in the state.

Conclusion

The study examined the link between the COVID-19 induced stay at home directives and social defiance by the poor in Rivers State, Nigeria. Based on observation and extensive content analysis of the situation, the study submits that the ruling class idea of stay at home or lockdown which was imported into Nigeria from the west is clearly antithetical to the daily survival of the poor in the state. This is based on the argument that a significant number of the population in Rivers State operate within the informal sector of the economy and cannot afford to stay at home longer than necessary. In other words, the stay at home directive presents a problem of coping with hunger which increases the act of social defiance especially among the poor who must engage in their daily economic activities to survive. This socio-economic reality in the

state has made the poor to stand in defiance of the directive of the ruling class for them to stay at home because obeying such an order would simply mean that they have agreed to die of hunger. As a result of their poor socioeconomic conditions, they defy even the harsh brutality of security agencies by devising a nocturnal market strategy where commercial activities takes before the day breaks.

The poverty induced social defiance of the stay at home directive in Rivers State and most parts of Nigeria goes a long way to show that adopting policy measures wholeheartedly from the west is not entirely good for the country. While lockdowns or stay at home directives as well as social distancing may be working well for countries in the west, the peculiar social, economic, health and religious scenarios in Rivers State and indeed Nigeria calls for homegrown measures that either modify these western approaches to fit our context or the design of entirely new models that work for us in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation

Based on the submissions and conclusion reached in this study, the following recommendations have been proposed.

- i. *Business by substitution:* For mostly informal market women and men, government can decide to allow business to go on based on a substitution strategy. For instance, where markets are originally made up of 100 sellers of food items, this can be divided into 30 per day to reduce overcrowding. This would allow for a healthy spacing in the markets in compliance to social distancing. This is in addition to deployment of health workers to such areas for on-the-spot temperature checks for a regulated number of visitors to the market.
- ii. *Provision of coordinated and sustainable palliatives.* Where the above is not feasible seeing



the deadly nature of the COVID-19, the state government should ensure that there is a coordinated and sustained distribution of foodstuffs to poor people across the state. Where this is not effectively done, poor people will continue to pose a threat to the government's fight against the coronavirus disease in the state.

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