

Neoliberal State and Child Welfare Policy in Nigeria

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Abstract: Nigeria as a neoliberal state has not fully lived up to its commitments of protecting citizens' lives and properties. This is because the neoliberal state is profit-oriented and functions as a business outfit, resulting to less attention for the wellbeing of citizens, including children. Unfortunately, family structures that are expected to provide safety for children have been affected by neoliberal economic policies. Extant literature has not adequately explained how the introduction of the neoliberal state and its economic policies such as privatization, removal of state subsidies, and deregulation undermine the implementation of existing child welfare policies in Nigeria. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explain how the introduction of neoliberal economic policies in Nigeria created a gap in which children are not provided for within the social safety nets. The study adopted qualitative interviews with 70 respondents across the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria, and their responses were thematically analysed in NVivo. The findings show that neoliberal policies are market and profit-driven processes, and these have significant impacts on the prospects of sustainable development and the welfare of children. We found defects in education, health, protection, nutrition, and overall wellbeing of children in Nigeria, based on the country's neoliberal direction.

Keywords: child welfare; deregulation; neoliberal state; privatization; subsidy removal; policy.

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Introduction

A concern that calls for urgent attention in Nigeria is poor child welfare system or the absence of implementation of child welfare policies. This is because the Nigerian child tends to lack care and protection, amidst a non-responsive child welfare system (Omakoji, 2019). The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines a child as any person below 18 years (Clark et al, 2020). Although, Nigeria has implemented the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), however, only 21 states have fully domesticated it, yet little has happened to the welfare of children, evidenced by institutionalized protective and responsive system to plights and threats faced by children (Umukoro, 2013). The Nigerian child lacks access to quality and affordable healthcare, education, nutrition, sanitation, and there are still prevalent cases of maltreatment, abandonment, child labor, child marriage, and child trafficking (African Union, 2020).

Despite many social welfare reforms for children across the world, Nigeria is yet to live up to the fullest potential of protecting its children population. Essentially because the country has evolved into a neoliberal state, it functions more as a business outfit at the expense of the vulnerable (Haque, 2008). The child welfare system is a group of public and private services that are focused on ensuring that all children sustainably live in safe and stable environments that support their well-being (Blank et al, 2011). Child welfare is, therefore, seen as a continuum of services designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have the necessary support from the government to care for their children successfully (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

Government or public policy informs the type of welfare packages a child enjoys in a society. Policy is a law, regulation, procedure, administrative action, incentive, or voluntary practice of governments and other institutions, which can reflect in resource allocations, including those meant for the wellbeing of children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Thus, policies for child welfare reflect the social contract that entails people grant trust to the leadership of states, with the hope that they are catered to by mechanisms of the states (Porter, 2018). The social contract is underpinned by the 1999 Constitution, as provided in Section 14.2(b) that the security and welfare of its people shall be the primary purpose of the government (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1999: 12).

As common within the policy landscape of Nigeria, meaningful child welfare policies like the 2003 Child Rights Act are in place that if implemented and enforced, will considerably cater to the wellbeing of children (Amuda, 2011). Clark et al (2020:1) state, 'early investments in children's health, education, and development have benefits that compound throughout the child's lifetime, for their future children and society as a whole. Also, that successful societies invest in their children and protect their rights, as is evident from countries that have done well on health and economic measures over the past few decades'. These investments in children's health,

education and development in Nigeria have been affected by the profit orientation of neo-liberalism. Omakoji (2019) describes it as the widespread of hardship, poverty, and inequality, severely affecting those that are vulnerable, children inclusive. In such systems, rights to the basics of wellbeing like health, education, and overall human rights protection are sacrificed for selfish interests of the elites (Iyayi, 2005).

Further, neoliberal societies are known for the commodification of public welfare, which entrenches inequity and displaces the vulnerable (Harvey, 2010). For instance, the privatization of schools has made schools become like businesses, exalting profit orientations over the goals of education. No doubt that privatization should be an instrument of making systems efficient, but such is only achieved when the government ensures that there are regulatory systems to balance material and human gains (Mbah, 2016). Even though there are several factors that affect the wellbeing of children, such as the wherewithal of parents, unsupportive cultural practices, conflicts and violence (UNICEF, 2021), it is important to pay attention to the policy landscape that obviously determines the fate of children and their caregivers in the countries they are born into. Therefore, the objective of the study is to explain how Nigeria's evolution into a neoliberal state undermines child welfare schemes, leading to children being poorly catered to and excluded from social security.

Theoretical perspective

This study adopted the social contract theory, which fundamentally asserts a barter exchange between citizens and governments, where the former collectively agree to allow the latter the power to lead, protect and promote their interests. This means that people accept to give up their rights to the State, in exchange for protection, rights to public welfare, and social security (Ibeanu & Mohammed, 2005). Thus, people transfer the responsibility for the provision of welfare, including policies such as child welfare policies, to the government, on the understanding that the government invokes this 'General Will' rather than any combination of sectional wills that may exist in society (Appadorai, 1978, p.27). The failure of social security and reasonable extent of social protection for the Nigerian child reflects the general failure of the social contract (Tanyi et al., 2018).

Thus, the introduction of the neoliberal state and its economic policies has deflated the social contract and worsened the situation of Nigerian children. The introduction of economic reform measures which the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and neoliberal government have promoted in Nigeria since 1986 from the privatization of public services and assets to deregulation and removal of state subsidies have, in theory, been intended to remove the Nigerian state from high command in the national economy. It made market competition to be the organizing principle of many areas of life from production to delivery of services, a policy that

seems to have stripped the state of 'excessive involvement' in the economy and society. As neoliberal governments become more disconnected from the people, social safety nets that Nigerians, especially children use to enjoy have disappeared. Affected areas include education, protection, employment, health, nutrition, water supply, infrastructures, child support and welfare, etc. (Iyayi, 2005: 170; Mbah, 2014). This means that the Nigerian government has not kept to the social contract owed to children, by reneging on social contract core values of protection and promotion of rights and welfare.

Methodology

Study area

This study was situated in Nigeria which is located at approximately latitude 10° North and longitude 8° East with a total area of 923,768 square kilometres. Nigeria is a federation comprising 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. The country is home to 374 ethnic groups (Otite 1990; Mustapha 2006). The four largest ethnic groups are Hausa/ Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo and Ijaw which make up approximately 74 per cent of the Nigerian population (World Atlas, 2017). Furthermore, we ground our study on Nigeria, given that Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, accounting for about 14% of the African population (World Population Review, 2020), and is also the continent's largest economy valued at US\$397 billion in 2019 (World Economic Forum, 2020). The population of the study area is 182,201,962 persons as of 2015 (Worldometer, 2017).

Sampling procedure

The study implores a cross-sectional design in adopting a qualitative survey. Multi-stage sampling technique was used in selecting 70 respondents drawn from the six geo-political zones in Nigeria for the study. Stage one involved the selection of one state from each geo-political zones using simple random sampling (balloting), including Abuja that is the Capital of Nigeria. That is Enugu state from the South-East, Rivers from South-South, Kaduna from North-West, Benue from North-Central, Lagos from the South-West, Adamawa from North-east, and FCT Abuja. Stage two was a selection of both government and non-governmental agencies in charge of child welfare in each state as well as parents that gave birth and takes care of children. To achieve this, purposive sampling was adopted in selecting agencies in the selected states. These agencies include the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons [NAPTIP], the United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF],

the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, NGOs, and parents. Quota sampling was adopted in allocating 10 respondents each to the selected study sites, giving a total of 70 respondents. After the allocation of equal quota to the selected states, purposive sampling was employed in selecting three officials from government owned agencies, three respondents from NGOs, and four parents from each state.

Data collection

The study utilized In-depth Interview (IDI) as an instrument for qualitative data collection from major stakeholders. A pilot study was carried out in two states other than the ones selected, to pretest the semi-structured interview instruments and check the workability of the proposed data collections methods. With the help of the information gathered during the pilot study and from other documented information such as Newspapers, UNICEF, and WHO; the IDI guides were finally produced to reflect the main and specific objectives of the study. Furthermore, seven research assistants were engaged for the study (one per each state), who are fluent in each state's indigenous and English language for cultural reasons, and familiarity with the environment.

The research assistants were trained on the objectives of the study and the techniques of conducting interviews. Before the fieldwork, we made initial contacts with the Permanent Secretaries or Directors of the agencies, as well as the founder of selected NGOs. The aim, modalities for the study, and permission to carry out the fieldwork in their various agencies were explained and sought, while assurance of anonymity and utmost confidentiality of any information that will be given was assured. The IDI was conducted in English and indigenous languages depending on the respondent's preference. In addition, the researcher sought the respondent's oral consent which was given before information on the interview was conducted. Based on the permission of respondents, the discussions were recorded with an audio tape while non-verbal expressions were captured by a note-taker (research assistant). Each of the IDI sessions lasted for 15-45 minutes and was conducted in a conducive environment chosen by the respondents.

Data analysis

The study adopted thematic analysis. After the data collection process, recorded data were transcribed and some were translated verbatim from the indigenous language to the English language. The transcribed data was compared to the notes taken during the interviews to ensure that the original meaning of what respondents said was retained. After the transcription process, the researcher generated themes that were in line with the formulated research objective with the help of thematic analysis (Nvivo version 12). The themes were reviewed in line with findings from the field and the aims of the study.

Results

Table 1
Summary of socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Socio-demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	35	50
Female	35	50
Total	70	100
Age		
>40 years	27	39
≤40 years	43	61
Total	70	100
Marital status		
Married at present	62	89
Not married at present	8	11
Total	70	100
Education		
Secondary school and below	2	3.0
Post-secondary school	68	97
Total	70	100
Occupation		
Working at present	55	79
Not working at present	15	21
Total	70	100
Income earner		
Yes	55	79
No	15	21
Total	70	100
Religion		
Christianity	37	53
Non-Christianity	33	47
Total	70	100
Category of participants		
UNICEF	18	26
Ministry of Women and Children Affairs	18	26
NGOs	17	24
Parent	17	24
Total	70	100

A total of 70 participants were sampled for the study. There was equal representation of gender; more participants are above 40 years of age while 89% were married persons. Also, majority of the participants (97%) have obtained post-secondary school education while more than half of the participants (79%) are working in different agencies and earn an income. The study recorded more Christians than any

other religion, while more participants sampled were from UNICEF and Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. Other participants sampled were NGO staff and parents (24%) respectively.

Neo-liberal economic policies and quality of child welfare policies in Nigeria

The rise of neoliberal economic policies as the dominant policy framework in Nigeria reduced child welfare policies to nothing, especially in the area of education and health. From the narratives from respondents, it was observed that so many children are out of school, hawking and doing all sorts of things because they cannot afford exorbitant school fees. To buttress this point, one of the respondents said:

The introduction of the neoliberal economy has led to a decline in school enrolment among children. The attributing factor is the economic situation of their parents who battle with static salaries, no work no pay issues due to strike actions. Also, constant strikes in Nigerian government schools affect the academic performance of children of poor masses while children of the rich, politicians, and legislators attend private schools in Nigeria or abroad [Assistant Director/F/50/Enugu State]

Another respondent explained the effects of the neoliberal economy on public primary schools. She said:

Through Universal Basic Education (UBE), it is expected that children will attend school without pay but it's no longer so. Children in public schools pay up to 6,000 naira for school fees per term. This high school fee affects those children whose parents cannot afford it [Executive Director/F/48/Enugu State].

Still on education, another respondent corroborated the above illustrative quote.

Many families cannot afford private schools for their children. Those schools are very expensive, and only the children of the rich can attend those schools. The same goes for private healthcare facilities. When primary and secondary schools were free, more and more unprivileged children were educated. The decrease in funding for education and the health of children is a result of corruption, weak policies, and institutions [Matron/F/36/Bayelsa State].

On the effects of the neoliberal regime on quality healthcare for children, one of the Senior Welfare Officers recounted, especially stressing the reliance on unorthodox medical practices for children in this modern era.

Yes, the same scenario in school fees applies to healthcare services. A lot of children are being nursed at home because parents cannot afford the bills private healthcare facilities are demanding. This is as a result of unavailability of healthcare facilities in government-owned hospitals that are needed for treatment. In most villages, parents treat their children with local concoctions. They visit local drug stores or use herbal medicines instead of going to hospitals which can be dangerous to their child's health [Senior Welfare Officer/F/40/Lagos State].

Similar to the above, a Director further added:

As a result of the high cost of healthcare services in government and private hospitals, some parents lose their children to death because they cannot afford the medical expenses. Although there is a health insurance scheme but its' for children whose parents are civil servants in government parastatals or ministries [Assistant Director/F/50/Enugu State].

And on social care and protection, a senior welfare officer lamented the many gaps. He said:

Ideally, the children of the poor are supposed to be considered in child welfare schemes because they do not have access to modern facilities, healthcare, education, etc. The government deducts stipends from civil servants' salaries under the umbrella of the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) set aside for the healthcare of their children but basically, this package has not been effective because most children are in rural areas. How do they now access such packages when their parents are farmers? [Senior Welfare Officer/M/50/Kaduna State].

Neo-liberal economic policies, poverty and child welfare in Nigeria

The findings of this study also reveal that government economic policies since 1986 have had negative implications for the child welfare system in Nigeria. The respondents state that Nigerian children and their families face immense challenges due to poverty, marginalization, and exclusion which threaten capacities of families and communities to evade economic hardship. Such difficult situations continue to hold sway due to lack of people-focused policies, as well as committed enforcement. Illustratively, one of the respondents said:

If we have a policy from 1986 to date without improvement, it means that those economic policies are on paper without implementation. This is because the state of children in Nigeria is far below what it should be. This is a result of a deliberate act of lack of effective implementation of enacted policies which increased poverty and

hardship [Executive Director/F/48/Enugu State].

One of the respondents explained thus:

Children experience hardship in Nigeria because virtually all sectors of the economy is in crisis. As a result, many parents cannot afford three square meals for their children, while those that can struggle to do so experience tremendous price increases of goods and services daily while their salary is static [Senior Welfare Officer/F/39/Adamawa State].

Another respondent added:

Government policies since 1986 have increased economic hardship and poverty because of the tremendous increase in the cost and availability of petroleum products, exchange rate, and lack of industries resulting in increased prices of goods and services beyond the reach of the poor masses and their children. Good policies like SURE-P lack strong institutions for its implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the programme. As a result, there is hardship in the land [Assistant Director/F/50/Enugu State].

Component of neoliberal economic reforms and its impact on child welfare policies in Nigeria

Most important dimensions of neoliberal economic policies in Nigeria which are relevant in understanding the problem of child welfare issues are privatization in the area of education and health, removal of government subsidies, and outsourcing of government functions, among others. These seem to have affected Nigerian children and their families in more negative ways. Majority of the respondents argue that all the components of neoliberal policies harm child welfare policies because they are all planned towards enriching the political elites and making the poor, poorer. We present each of these components further.

Privatization of education

Privatization is one the components of neoliberal economic policies that undermine child welfare policies in Nigeria. Our interviewees argue that privatization does affect child's education in a negative way because it gives power to the ruling elite by making them richer at the expense of the poor masses. This is because education is poorly funded in annual budgets since 1986. For instance, privatization of schools has led to increased fees, which affect children from poor homes.

Through UBE, it is expected that children will attend school without pay but it's no longer so. Children in public primary schools pay at least 5,000 naira, while those in secondary schools pay at least 50,000 for school fees per term. This high school fee affects those children whose parents cannot afford it [Executive Director/F/48/Enugu State].

Away from privatization, government's neglect of public education for children was lamented. Such neglect is amidst insufficient appropriations to the education sector, still with no value.

Privatization undermines access to quality and affordable education. Structural Adjustment Project (SAP) did not do much to improve the educational sector at all. Poor school funding, dilapidated buildings and poor remuneration of teachers resulting in poor teaching and learning are everyday issues in schools. In some schools in Bayelsa and all over the country, pupils and students sit on the bay floor and under the trees to learn which explains the state of public education in Nigeria [Senior Welfare Officer/F/38/Bayelsa State].

Regarding the School Feeding Programme, respondents lamented the quality of meals, as well as sustainability.

To be honest, the government is a ridiculous bunch of people. I was so angry from the little I witnessed in Lagos, Nassarawa, and Kaduna because of the quantity and quality of the food given to children. It seems the government has devised another means of embezzling money. How can one feed a child jellof rice without any traces of tomatoes and other ingredients? The programme has not achieved its aim because schools in the rural communities have not experienced it, while those that have are nothing to write home about [Executive Director/F/48/Enugu State].

Another respondent added:

The introduction of the school feeding programme was excellent but funding the programme after mapping out a huge amount from the budget is mind boggling. Stipends are being given to schools for the programme and as a result, children are fed with unbalanced food. The rate of corruption in Nigeria is alarming. Imagine the huge sum the federal government claimed they spent on feeding programme even when schools were shut down due to the coronavirus pandemic [Senior Administrative Staff/M/52/Adamawa State].

Privatization of healthcare

Privatization of healthcare has its own devastating effect on child welfare policies in Nigeria. The findings of the study reveal that the removal of government subsidies has made it difficult for citizens, especially children to access both public and private health facilities. The vast majority of hospitals are operated on a profit-oriented basis by the government, industries, and voluntary agencies. The respondents argued that children often face many problems such as poor health and lack of access to quality healthcare. In addition, many children in Nigeria lack adequate nutrition, in part due to challenges ranging from removal of government subsidies, negative effects of privatization, and poverty which leads to major nutritional problems. A Director at the Enugu State Ministry of Health posits:

The country is faced with economic hardship and as such, most families cannot afford three square meals let alone go to school. Around 60% of children in the southeast experience inadequate nutrition in their respective homes, although they suppose to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner they now eat at irregular times. Whatever their parents can afford is what they eat. Some eat only bread in the morning; afternoon and night [Executive Director/F/48/Enugu State].

In the same vein, a respondent said:

Education and healthcare are public services that should be provided by the government. But with the introduction of Neoliberal policy, Nigeria has gotten to a state of inequality. The less privileged children that cannot afford these basic amenities are neglected. As a result, some of the neglected become problems causing insecurity and social vices in the country [Senior Welfare Officer/M/42/FCT Abuja].

Removal of government subsidies

Removal of government subsidies was identified as another component of neoliberal economic reforms that has an impact on the child welfare policies in Nigeria. Removal of subsidies has dealt with the poor masses especially the children in a way that lots of families cannot afford essential services when subsidies are removed. Illustratively, a respondent said:

When a mother buys a liter of kerosene for 800 naira, how much is remaining for her to cook with let alone pay school fees? Many families eat from hand to mouth. They cannot afford three square meals or education for their children [Parent/44/M/FCT Abuja].

Discussion

In 1986, due to further deepening of local economic crises, the government of Ibrahim Babangida imposed the austerity measures to turn the economy around. This was known as Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). It introduced restructuring, dismissals, wage cuts, deregulation, privatization, removal of state subsidies, and currency devaluation with its economic hardship. It made the poorest children to be four times less likely to go to school than the richest and five times less likely to complete primary education, while the poorest children are also almost 6 times as likely to be unable to read as the richest (Aregbeshola, 2018). With the predicted increase of poor persons in Nigeria to over 95 million by 2022 and beyond, the welfare of children in the Nigerian society, especially those from vulnerable homes should crucially be discussed (Oyedeki, 2022). They should be discussed alongside comprehensive child protective legislations, such as the Child Rights Act and African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (CRWC) (African Union, 2020).

Nigerian children and their families face immense challenges due to poverty, marginalization, and exclusion that are occasioned by the profit nature of neoliberal policies. The dramatic reduction in budgets concerning health, nutrition, and education in recent decades affect the certainty of the future of children (Mbah, 2016). When public budgets are slashed, the primary victims are disadvantaged families and children who typically are not well organized. Yet, Article 18 (1) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child especially on the protection of the family stipulated that the family shall be the natural unit and basis of society. It shall enjoy the protection and support of the State for its establishment and development. Unfortunately, the failure of the state to guarantee social and public welfare has transformed public welfare from being a public good provided by the state to a private service that individuals and groups have to provide themselves, through various means. Admittedly, Malin (2019) states that the impacts of this and other neoliberal leanings concerning the role of the state, outsourcing and privatization have contributed to a qualitative failure and lack of commitment towards delivering public services.

Our findings have also shown that the most important dimensions of neoliberal economic policies in Nigeria which are relevant in understanding the problem of child welfare are privatization in the area of education and health, removal of government subsidies, and outsourcing of government functions, among others. The role of the state in defining and protecting child welfare in education is therefore diminished by neo-liberal economic policies through privatization and public sector commercialization of education and health in Nigeria, either formally or informally, or even outright neglect of both sectors by the government. Since 2016, budgets for both education and health have been below 8 and 5 percent of the total budget, which goes against regional and global benchmarks of 15 to 20 percent (Aworinde, 2019; Sasu, 2022). Private schools are scattered all over Nigeria compared to public

schools, and the private schools are today considered to be of more quality than the public ones (Aworinde, 2019; Statista, 2022). And it is unfortunate that government's policies and programmes in this regard have been only reflective of increased appropriations to private pockets, while standards are washed away (Malin, 2019). This also accounts for high out-of-school children in Nigeria, currently over 18 million (UNICEF, 2020; Yaba, 2022).

Whilst some countries accepted neo-liberalism voluntarily, Nigeria did so in response to pressure and coercion from the World Bank and IMF (Wahidi, 2012; Montero, 2010). The supposedly economic freedom in the form of neo-liberalism is weak and most of the time, non-existent as it opens the door for widespread abuse and exploitation. Free medical services and feeding, free and compulsory education, supplemental security income, financial assistance programmes for infants, and children, and assistance for needy families have disappeared under the neoliberal Nigeria. The public sector's strength is the provision of state-subsidized care to many citizens who are unable to afford private sector services (Ihejirika, 2022). Countries can make economic and infrastructural progress, even while they prioritize public goods, especially those that will cater to the needs of children. There are successful stories in the global north (Aregbeshola, 2018). Therefore, Nigeria needs to evaluate its neoliberal approaches to be in synch with welfarist obligations to vulnerable populations, focusing on protecting, promoting, and advancing their rights and progress. This is only how best the social contract can be preserved and respected.

In conclusion, the study shows that current neoliberal structure in Nigeria has impacted public spending on health and education, which have stagnated in Nigeria in the past three decades and may be insufficient to meet the needs of children. Despite the existence of national and regional child welfare policies, children have continued to be vulnerable in Nigeria, and the protection and promotion of their welfare and rights continue to suffer neglect. This is so because the government has increasingly taken a profit-oriented approach to governance, and unfortunately, one where the political elites are usually the most beneficiaries as opposed to the people. It is clearly an aberration of the social contract that emphasizes care for the people by those the people have sanctioned to lead them. Thus, while neoliberalism is important to stimulate the economy, it must not be at the expense of the welfare of the citizens, let alone those who are vulnerable. It is important that social workers and other related professionals take to campaigns that should return welfarism and increase government's attention to fulfilling its social contract with citizens, specifically with the children. In all, despite the validity of our findings, we acknowledge a few limitations pertaining to the non-involvement of the active voices of children on how they feel by the treatment of a neo-liberal government. Also, it would have been a strength if we had interviewed top-level policy actors like heads of governments, but they were unreachable.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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