

FUEL SUBSIDY: THE CHALLENGES AND THE REMEDIAL STRATEGIES FOR THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the challenges associated with fuel subsidies and the curative strategies for the Nigerian government. The fuel subsidy in Nigeria has been an important economic policy aiming at lowering the cost of petroleum goods for residents. However, the policy's long-term viability has been called into doubt due to the significant financial load it throws on the government, as well as its contribution to systemic corruption and inefficiency. Key challenges include economic burden and fiscal deficit, inequitable distribution of benefits, and corruption and mismanagement. These factors have led to several malpractices, which include corruption and fraudulent claims, fuel diversion and smuggling, political manipulation, and patronage networks. This study also explores remedial strategies for addressing these challenges, emphasizing the need for comprehensive economic reform. These include diversification of energy sources, investment in public transport, and refining capacity expansion to mitigate the impact of subsidy removal on vulnerable populations. The study concluded that by fostering an efficient public transportation system, the government can alleviate the immediate burden on citizens while ensuring sustainable economic growth. One of the recommendations provided was that strengthening local fuel production by investing in refineries and encouraging public-private partnerships will reduce Nigeria's dependence on imported fuel and stabilize local fuel prices in the long term.

Keyword: Fuel Subsidy, Origin, Governance, Challenges, Remedial, Malpractices and Nigerian Government

Introduction

Fuel subsidies have long been a contentious topic in Nigerian politics and economics. To mitigate the effects of volatile global oil prices and increase the affordability of petroleum products for its populace, the Nigerian government implemented fuel subsidies. Nevertheless, this program

has created a number of difficulties, including corruption, inefficiencies, and unmanageable national debt. The government has strained its finances, cut support for important sectors, and impeded economic progress by spending billions of dollars subsidizing fuel costs over time.

One of the major challenges of fuel subsidies is the economic distortion it creates. By artificially lowering fuel prices, the policy encourages overconsumption and smuggling of subsidized fuel to neighboring countries where fuel prices are higher. Additionally, the subsidy system has been riddled with corruption and mismanagement. Reports have shown that powerful vested interests, including marketers and government officials, have exploited the system, diverting funds meant for the subsidy program for personal gain (Adams, 2015). The result is a system that benefits a few elites while depriving the general population of the intended benefits.

Furthermore, fiscal sustainability is another pressing issue. Fuel subsidies consume a significant portion of Nigeria's budget, diverting resources from crucial sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Adegoke, 2021). With the volatility of oil prices and Nigeria's heavy reliance on oil revenue, continuing fuel subsidies poses a risk to the country's fiscal health. As oil prices fluctuate, the subsidy burden grows, making it increasingly difficult for the government to maintain fiscal discipline (IMF, 2020).

Remedial solutions in several forms have been developed to address these issues. With social safety nets in place to mitigate the effects on the most vulnerable communities, the Nigerian government has contemplated phasing out the subsidies gradually. There are also requests for increasing the economy's diversification in order to lessen reliance on oil, enhancing the oil industry's transparency and governance, and making infrastructural investments in order to increase the country's capacity for refining oil imports. Nigeria faces both possibilities and challenges as a result of the elimination of fuel subsidies. Eliminating subsidies would surely have short-term negative effects, particularly for low-income households, but stronger governance, economic diversification, and fiscal sustainability will have long-term advantages that might greatly enhance Nigeria's economic future.

Concept of fuel subsidy

A fuel subsidy is a form of government funding intended to lower consumer fuel prices. The purpose of this is to maintain reduced fuel prices and increase accessibility for the general public. The process of removing government financial support for fuel results in prices rising to market rates, or fuel subsidy withdrawal. This can have negative effects on the economy and society in addition to raising fuel prices. According to Onyeizugbe & Onwuka (2024), fuel subsidy means that a fraction of the price that consumers are supposed to pay to enjoy the use of petroleum products is paid by the government so as to ease the price burden.

One of the government's numerous consumption subsidy programs in Nigeria is fuel. By directly funding oil companies, it aims to reduce fuel costs and, consequently, fuel prices for Nigerians. Direct or indirect payments made by the government to companies or individuals are

known as subsidies. Direct subsidies are when the government gives the beneficiary financial money. Conversely, industries or households profit economically from government measures like tax rebates when there are indirect subsidies.

Generally speaking, the purpose of subsidies is to encourage production and consumption. If the government pays refineries directly, for example, the producers' production costs would be reduced, which would lead to a rise in fuel production. A fuel subsidy is only the sum of money that the government uses to cover a portion of the cost of fuel that its citizens use. Sodeeq (2024) asserted that subsidies are a form of government intervention in the market that aims to provide financial assistance to individuals, businesses, or institutions to relieve burdens deemed to be in the general interest of the public. A fuel subsidy is a government discount on the market price of fossil fuels to make consumers pay less than the prevailing market price of fuel. When subsidies are in place, consumers would pay below the market price per liter of the petroleum product.

Challenges of fuel subsidy in Nigeria

Nigeria's economy, public opinion, and governance have all been significantly impacted by the elimination or decrease of gasoline subsidies, which has long been a contentious topic. Fuel subsidy schemes have given rise to a number of difficulties, such as:

Economic Burden and Fiscal Deficit

Fuel subsidies impose a significant financial strain on the Nigerian government, contributing to the country's fiscal deficit. According to Adediran (2020), the Nigerian government has spent billions of dollars annually to keep fuel prices artificially low. This expenditure limits the government's ability to invest in critical sectors like education, healthcare, and infrastructure. As oil prices fluctuate globally, the cost of maintaining the subsidy often rises, further burdening government revenues, especially during periods of low oil prices.

Corruption and mismanagement

The fuel subsidy system in Nigeria has been plagued by corruption, with reports of funds being diverted by fraudulent claims of fuel imports that never occurred. Uche & Chukwuemeka (2021) highlighted that the lack of transparency in the management of subsidy funds has made the program susceptible to fraud, leading to losses of billions of naira. This has eroded public trust in the government and hindered efforts to implement meaningful reforms.

Fuel Scarcity and Black Market Activities

Despite the heavy subsidies, Nigeria has frequently experienced fuel shortages. As noted by Alade (2019), these shortages are often a result of supply chain inefficiencies, smuggling, and hoarding. The subsidy encourages smuggling, as prices are higher in neighboring countries, leading to significant losses. The black market thrives under such conditions, with fuel being sold at inflated prices to desperate consumers, further undermining the purpose of the subsidy.

Social Unrest and Protest

Attempts to reduce or remove fuel subsidies have led to widespread public protests. The removal of subsidies has often been met with resistance due to the direct impact on the cost of living, as fuel prices influence transportation and food costs. As Olayinka (2022) explains, past efforts to remove subsidies, particularly 2012 and 2020, led to nationwide strikes and demonstrations, reflecting the public's sensitivity to fuel price hikes in an already strained economy.

Inequitable Distribution of Benefits

Fuel subsidies disproportionately benefit the wealthier population, who consume more fuel, leaving the lower-income population with relatively less benefit from the program. Richer households, owning more vehicles, gain more from subsidized fuel than poorer households. This has led to calls for better-targeted social safety nets that directly address the needs of the poor instead of blanket subsidies.

Origin of fuel subsidy in Nigeria

In Nigeria's economic history, fuel subsidies have frequently appeared as both a source of controversy and support. Initially intended to protect citizens from the direct effects of fluctuations in the world oil market, the subsidy has developed into a sophisticated mechanism that affects gasoline prices and, in turn, transportation expenses. According to Yunusa, Yakubu, Emeje, Ibrahim, Stephen, & Egbunu (2023), the Nigerian economy has been subsidized in various ways for many years, and this includes fuel, education, and electricity. Fuel subsidies began in the 1970s and became institutionalized in 1977, following the promulgation of the Price Control Act, which made it illegal for some products (including petrol) to be sold above the regulated price.

Nigerians have been witnessing the journey of fuel prices for decades; from a meager 6 kobo per liter in 1973 to an astounding 617 naira per liter in 2023. In response to the 1973 oil price shock, Nigeria began using subsidies in the 1970s. The shock scenario sent oil prices skyrocketing across the globe. As mentioned by Igbokwe-Ibeto, Ewuim & Agbodike (2015), since the early 1960s, enormous revenues have been generated from this natural endowment. It is in the public domain that the government of General Yakubu Gowon had so much money that it had problems deciding what to do with it.

Gowon's (1973–1976) comparatively mild rises during the first few years were brought on by the post–oil crisis and variations in worldwide demand, which resulted in small increases that affected transportation costs. From 6 Kobo to 9 Kobo, fuel prices increased. Another is Obasanjo (1978–1982), where economic difficulties led to a significant increase in price from 9 kobo to 20 kobo, hence impacting transportation costs. Changes in the mechanics of the world oil market continued under Shagari's reign, impacting transportation expenses. Even though the Babangida I and II regimes (1986–1991) kept up economic changes to conform to international trends, this led to a 97.5% increase that affected the affordability of transportation. During the regime of Shonekan

& Abacha (1993–1999), the '90s witnessed subsidy introductions, abrupt changes, and price drops, impacting the transport sector. Shonekan's economic instability led to a staggering 614.29% increase, and he spent only 82 days in power, while Abacha's tenure brought fluctuations, including a promising drop in 1993 and a big increase later in that year, which finally ended with a short drop in 1994 (Autogril, 2024).

Subsidies were increased by 50% in 2000 under the Obasanjo second rule, which had a favorable effect on transportation expenses. Transportation costs increased sharply in 2003 and 2004 as a direct result of the withdrawal of subsidies, rising by 61.54%. Restoring subsidies lessened the load, but the 30% increase represented the intricate balancing act between domestic demands and changes in the world economy that affect transportation expenses. Yar'Adua achieved a noteworthy 15.39% price drop in 2007, demonstrating efforts to stabilize prices and having a favorable impact on transportation costs.

Economic difficulties and the elimination of subsidies in 2012 caused a sharp spike of 116.92%, which set off the Occupy Nigeria rallies and had a major effect on transportation prices throughout Jonathan's administration from 2012 to 2015. Political factors and the return of subsidies caused price variations, which by 2015 had decreased by 10.31% and relieved transportation expenses. The 66.67% increase under Buhari's administration was a reaction to changes in the world oil market, which affected transportation costs between 2015 and 2023. Subsequent years witnessed a 124% increase, impacting the transportation sector as economic challenges persisted. In the Tinubu era, immediate removal of subsidies resulted in a surge from N195 to N540 per liter in June and an unprecedented N617 per liter by July, significantly impacting transportation costs. Cost to fill a car tank in (July 2023) was approximately N120, 000, till date.

Malpractices in fuel subsidy in Nigeria

In Nigeria, where the government subsidizes fuel prices to make petroleum products more affordable for its residents, fuel subsidies have long been a contentious topic. Fuel subsidies in Nigeria have been beset by pervasive malpractices, corruption, and inefficiency, despite being designed to lessen the financial burden on the general public. The subsidies' advantages have been weakened by these misdeeds, which have also resulted in large financial losses.

Corruption and fraudulent claims

One of the most significant malpractices in Nigeria's fuel subsidies is corruption. According to Eze & Afolabi (2019), many petroleum marketers submit fraudulent claims for subsidies, inflating the amount of fuel imported or claiming subsidies for fuel that was never delivered. These fraudulent activities have resulted in the loss of billions of dollars from the Nigerian treasury. This corruption is often facilitated by a lack of transparency and oversight in the fuel importation process.

Fuel Diversion and Smuggling

Fuel diversion is another common malpractice within the subsidy system. Fuel intended for local consumption is often diverted to neighboring countries, where it is sold at higher prices due to the lack of subsidies in those markets. As noted by Bello and Ogu (2020), this diversion creates an artificial scarcity of petroleum products in Nigeria, forcing the government to continue subsidizing fuel prices to meet local demand. Ikechukwu (2022) adds that the porous nature of Nigeria's borders and weak regulatory frameworks make it easy for fuel smugglers to divert large quantities of subsidized fuel.

Over-invoicing of Fuel Imports

Over-invoicing of fuel imports is another fraudulent practice associated with the fuel subsidy regime. According to Fagbemi (2021), marketers inflate the cost of importing fuel, presenting inflated invoices to the government to claim higher subsidy amounts. This practice not only drains government resources but also distorts the market, making it difficult for genuine fuel marketers to compete. Over-invoicing occurs because of the lack of rigorous auditing and monitoring systems in place to verify the actual cost of imported fuel.

Political manipulation and patronage networks

Political manipulation has also played a significant role in perpetuating malpractices within the fuel subsidy system. Politicians use the subsidy regime as a tool for maintaining political patronage networks, allocating subsidies to their allies in exchange for political support. This manipulation undermines efforts to reform the system, as those benefiting from the subsidies resist any attempts to change the status quo.

Fuel subsidy during Goodluck Jonathan governance

During Goodluck Jonathan's administration in Nigeria (2010-2015), fuel subsidies became a highly contentious and politically charged issue. However, this subsidy system had long been chastised for its inefficiencies, corruption, and unsustainable financial burden on the government's budget. By the time Jonathan assumed office, the subsidy regime had become a financial strain on the national budget. According to Ogundipe (2017), the fuel subsidy had ballooned, with the government spending billions of dollars annually to sustain the artificially low price of fuel, a situation that was unsustainable in the long term. Additionally, corruption within the subsidy system became rampant, with reports that oil marketers were inflating import claims and diverting funds meant for subsidies (Ezeamalu, 2019).

On 1 January 2012, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan abruptly removed the fuel subsidy provided to citizens by the government. Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala championed the decision, and the country's citizens received no prior warning. The government argued that the removal of the heavy subsidy would free up funds for other public services, including health and infrastructure projects, and that then liberalization of the fuel industry would

benefit the economy. They also argued that the primary beneficiaries of the subsidy were the wealthy, who used more fuel than the poor, and wholesalers who made a profit selling subsidized fuel out of the country.

The subsidy debate during Jonathan's administration laid the groundwork for ongoing discussions about fuel subsidy reform in Nigeria. As Nnaji and Nwankwo (2020) pointed out, the failure to address corruption in the oil sector and the government's inability to develop domestic refining capacity have left Nigeria dependent on imported fuel, perpetuating the need for subsidies. Ultimately, the fuel subsidy issue continued to plague Nigeria even after Jonathan's tenure. His administration, while making attempts to address the fiscal challenges posed by the subsidy, could not fully extricate the economy from the dependence on artificially low fuel prices.

Fuel subsidy during Mohammed Buhari governance

On the removal (or withdrawal) of fuel subsidies by the Buhari regime and how this policy has greatly worsened the socio-economic conditions of already long-suffering Nigerians. Obo, Omenka, Agishi, & Coke (2017) explained that there is no doubt that the performance of an administration can be assessed not by relying on the propagandistic effusions of its spokespersons but by critically examining the results or outcomes of the policies and programs implemented by the administration and how these have impinged on the welfare of the citizenry. The current crushing economic misery in the country can only be adequately understood by looking at the repercussions of the Buhari-led government's strategy of removing gasoline subsidies. According to the findings, the Buhari administration was not sincere in its fight against corruption; rather, the fight was selective and targeted political opposition and opponents, leaving the perpetrators in his government, and fuel subsidies did not contribute to the improvement of the Nigerian economy due to corruption.

By increasing the price of gasoline—through the withdrawal of government subsidies—President Muhammad Buhari, his government, and his party (the All Progressive Congress) have failed to fulfill one of the major promises they made to Nigerians during the campaign for the 2015 general elections. During the campaign, Buhari had pledged to reduce the cost of petrol by 50%; Esther (2024) mentioned that, in May 2016, Muhammadu Buhari increased the pump price of petrol from eighty-seven naira (N87) to one hundred and forty-five naira (N145) per liter. The fact that this act had devastating effects on the lives of most of the Nigerian masses cannot be overemphasized. In Nigeria's petrol-dependent and petrol-driven economy, this astronomical increase instantly precipitated huge increases in the costs of goods and services. And the victims are the already poor and long-suffering masses.

It is argued that given the magnitude of the pump price increase, the manner in which it was implemented, and the enormous increases in the costs of goods and services that it has caused, President Buhari appears to be on par with the Biblical King Rehoboam, who presided over an era

of unprecedented cruelty in Israel. It is also argued that subsidies, if well-articulated, managed, and targeted, can be used as a policy tool to promote the public good.

Fuel subsidy during Bola Tinubu governance

Fuel subsidy removal became a hallmark of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration from its onset. On May 29, 2023, in his inaugural address, Tinubu declared that "fuel subsidy is gone," ending a policy that had been in place for decades. The fuel subsidy, initially implemented to make fuel affordable for citizens, had become unsustainable, costing Nigeria over ₦6 trillion annually in the years leading up to its removal (Premium Times, 2023). Tinubu's administration claimed that the subsidies disproportionately benefited richer Nigerians and created a breeding environment for corruption. By abolishing it, the government hoped to allocate resources to infrastructure, education, and healthcare, addressing more pressing developmental needs.

The immediate consequence of the subsidy removal was a dramatic increase in fuel prices, which jumped from about ₦185 per liter to over ₦1200, and even higher in some regions. This price hike led to increased transportation costs and general inflation, with ripple effects across food prices, utilities, and other essential goods (Vanguard, 2023). The removal of the subsidy exacerbated the economic struggles of many Nigerians, especially low-income households who were already grappling with the high cost of living. The inflationary pressures pushed many below the poverty line, further straining the economy. Labor unions, notably the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC), responded with protests and strikes, demanding the reversal of the subsidy removal or compensatory measures to alleviate the economic hardships faced by the citizens (The Guardian, 2023).

In response to the public outcry, the Tinubu administration rolled out a series of remedial measures aimed at cushioning the effects of the subsidy removal. The government introduced cash transfers, food relief programs, and announced subsidies on public transportation to help ease the burden on vulnerable populations. It also engaged in negotiations with labor unions to review the national minimum wage in light of rising costs (BusinessDay, 2023). The administration argued that these palliative measures, though temporary, would provide immediate relief to those hardest hit by the removal, while the long-term benefits of the subsidy removal would outweigh the short-term challenges. However, many criticized the relief efforts as insufficient and unevenly distributed, with reports indicating that some of the promised aid did not reach those in need (Sahara Reporters, 2023).

Finally, the withdrawal of the gasoline subsidy under Bola Tinubu's tenure signified a fundamental shift in Nigeria's economic policies. While the immediate consequences were harsh, with inflation and public dissatisfaction growing, the administration claimed that the long-term benefits would include a more sustainable economy and more effective use of government resources.

Remedial strategies to fuel subsidy challenges in Nigeria

The withdrawal or decrease of gasoline subsidies in Nigeria has been a difficult topic, affecting both the economy and residents' everyday life. petrol subsidies were first implemented to make petrol more accessible for Nigerians, but the program has now proven economically unsustainable, resulting in fiscal imbalances, corruption, and inefficiencies in the energy sector. With the elimination of subsidies, it is critical to investigate alternative measures to offset the negative consequences on the economy and residents. As mentioned by PWC (2024), the following are the remedial strategies to fuel subsidy challenges in Nigeria.

Diversification of Energy Sources

One of the key strategies is the diversification of energy sources to reduce overdependence on petrol. This involves promoting alternative sources of energy such as solar, wind, and natural gas. By investing in renewable energy and creating incentives for companies and households to adopt these alternatives, Nigeria can reduce its reliance on fossil fuels and create a more sustainable energy future.

Investment in Public Transportation

Fuel subsidy removal often leads to an increase in transportation costs, disproportionately affecting low-income citizens. A viable remedy is to invest in an efficient, affordable public transportation system. Developing modern railways, expanding the bus network, and encouraging ride-sharing schemes can reduce the need for private vehicles, thus alleviating the financial burden on commuters and reducing national fuel consumption.

Refine capacity expansion

One of the root causes of Nigeria's fuel subsidy problem is the lack of adequate domestic refining capacity, which forces the country to import a significant portion of its refined petroleum products. To address this, the government should prioritize the rehabilitation and upgrading of existing refineries and encourage the establishment of private refineries. Improving refining capacity will reduce the cost of fuel imports and stabilize prices, making the economy less vulnerable to global oil price fluctuations.

Promoting Efficient Fuel Usage

Encouraging the efficient use of fuel through public awareness campaigns and the promotion of fuel-efficient vehicles can help reduce fuel consumption. The government can introduce policies to incentivize the adoption of fuel-efficient technologies and practices, such as tax rebates for hybrid and electric cars or investing in technologies that reduce energy waste in industries.

Price Stabilization Mechanisms

The volatility of global oil prices can lead to significant fluctuations in fuel prices domestically. Implementing a fuel price stabilization fund or other market-based mechanisms can help cushion the effects of sudden price hikes. The government can create a reserve fund to absorb excess revenues during periods of high oil prices, which can be used to stabilize prices when global oil prices rise sharply.

Corruption Control and Transparency

Corruption in the fuel subsidy program has contributed significantly to its failure. Therefore, addressing fuel subsidy challenges requires stringent anti-corruption measures. The government should enhance transparency in fuel procurement and distribution processes and ensure that subsidy payments are made directly to the most vulnerable groups. Independent audits of fuel subsidy disbursements should also be conducted regularly to enhance accountability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the fuel subsidy in Nigeria poses several challenges, including economic instability, rising inflation, and public unrest. Addressing these issues requires the government to adopt comprehensive remedial strategies. These should include the transparent allocation of saved funds to improve infrastructure, healthcare, and education, thereby enhancing the quality of life for citizens. Implementing targeted social safety nets can support vulnerable populations affected by subsidy removal. Additionally, investing in alternative energy sources and boosting local fuel production can reduce dependency on imports. By fostering an efficient public transportation system, the government can alleviate the immediate burden on citizens while ensuring sustainable economic growth.

Recommendation

1. Introduce well-targeted social safety nets, such as cash transfers and subsidies for essential goods, to cushion the effects on vulnerable populations directly impacted by subsidy removal.
2. Redirect funds saved from subsidy removal into critical sectors like infrastructure, healthcare, education, and transportation. This reinvestment can create jobs, reduce poverty, and improve citizens' quality of life.
3. Strengthen local fuel production by investing in refineries and encouraging public-private partnerships. This will reduce Nigeria's dependence on imported fuel and stabilize local fuel prices in the long term.

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