

## **Faith-Based Organisations and the Containment of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) seeks to positively effect changes in society through Christian demonstration of love that positively impacts Christians and non-Christians alike. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease. It is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus disease as an outbreak of global health emergency in March 2020. Previous studies on Faith-Based Organisations and their role in checkmating the COVID-19 pandemic have consistently opened academic vacuums yet to be explored. It is in response to the yearnings created by these vacuums that this paper is visualized. The objective of the paper is to highlight the role of Faith-Based organisations in the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The paper relies greatly on secondary sources of data. The data generated through the above source of information are subjected to descriptive analysis. The findings of the study show that the COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences beyond the spread of the disease itself in Nigeria. The paper concludes that the humanitarian response of Faith-Based Organisations in mitigating the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria is beneficial. The study, therefore, recommends an alignment of Faith-Based health providers with the national health system to mitigate the future occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Corporate Social Responsibility, Disease, Faith-Based Organisations and Coronavirus containment

## Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has impacted Faith-Based Organisations in Nigeria in diverse ways. These include the cancellation of worship services, the closure of Sunday schools and the suspension of ceremonies, festivals and pilgrimages. The COVID-19 Pandemic ravaged Nigeria, Africa and indeed, the entire human race the world over. The world faced an unprecedented global medical emergency in modern history between 2019 and 2022<sup>1</sup>. There is an increasing interest in the relationship between Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) and psychological development during the global outbreak of coronavirus disease. Social scientists and medical experts suggest that the beliefs and practices of members of Faith-Based Organisations like the Apostolic Faith, for example, may have some impact on how members of these religious organizations respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Religious gatherings are regarded as some of the main avenues that can contribute to the transmission of COVID-19 disease. Previous studies have looked at the role of Faith-Based Organisations in the mitigation of public health crises like HIV/AIDS, the Ebola virus disease and other infectious diseases the world over from different perspectives. However, little attention has been paid to the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Nigerian context. It is in response to the yearnings created by this gap that this paper is visualized. The objective of the paper is to highlight the role of Faith-Based organisations in the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The paper relies heavily on secondary sources of data. The data generated through this source are subjected to descriptive analysis. The findings of this paper will directly benefit members of Faith-Based Organisations, Faith-Based health providers, health workers and the national health system in Nigeria. The suggestions of the paper may be incorporated by policymakers into the health care development scheme in Nigeria.

## **The Emergence and Spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria**

The coronavirus (CoV) is a large family of viruses known to cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to acute respiratory tract infection<sup>2</sup>. The severity of the infection may be visible as pneumonia, acute respiratory syndrome, and even death<sup>3</sup>. On December 31, 2019, severe cases of pneumonia surfaced in the city of Wuhan in the Chinese Province of Hubei<sup>4</sup>.

On January 7, 2020, the causative agent was identified as a new coronavirus (2019-nCoV), and the disease was later named Covid-19 by the WHO. The Virus spread extensively in the Wuhan region of China and its territories. Though experts suspected that the virus is transmitted from animals to humans, there are mixed reports on the origin of the virus. There are no treatment options available for the virus as such, limited to the use of anti-HIV drugs and or other antivirals such as Remdesivir and Galidesivir. For the containment of the virus, it is recommended to quarantine the infected and to follow good hygiene practices. The virus has a significant socio-economic impact globally. China is likely to experience a greater setback than other countries from the pandemic due to added trade war pressure...<sup>5</sup>

In Nigeria, the index case of covid-19 was recorded on February 27, 2020<sup>6</sup>. The Federal Ministry of Health confirmed the first case of coronavirus disease in Sagamu, Ogun State, Nigeria. Thus, making Nigeria the third country in Africa to officially recognize an imported coronavirus infectious disease (COVID-19) after Egypt and Algeria. The index case occurred in an Italian national who came to Nigeria from Milan in Italy on February 24, 2020<sup>7</sup>.

A total of 216 contacts in Lagos and Ogun states, including the passengers on the February 24 air flight, were identified for 14 days of follow-up, with 40 of these contacts identified as high-risk. Eleven days later, an asymptomatic contact of the index case in Ogun State was confirmed as the nation's second case of covid-19. The epidemiology of covid-19 in Nigeria has since evolved, with cases identified in 35 of 36 states in the country, plus the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Although Lagos State was initially the epicentre of the outbreak, Kano State and the FCT have now joined Lagos State as high-burden states, contributing 64.5% of the cumulative total cases in Nigeria by the end of May 2020. Between February 27 and May 31, 2020, 63,882 persons have been tested for covid-19 in Nigeria, of which 10,162 (15.9%) were confirmed as being infected with SARs-Cov-2 by RT-PCR. Males appear to be disproportionately affected counting for 67.7% (6,882) of the confirmed cases. A total of 287 deaths have been recorded among the confirmed covid-19 cases resulting in an observed case fatality ratio (CFR) of approximately 2.8%<sup>8</sup>.

Large-scale immune compromised population, political corruption, weak health care system, and political distrust are among the various factors that contribute to the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria. In Nigeria, political corruption motivates large-scale political distrust<sup>9</sup>. This inevitably, inexorably leads to the undermining of public compliance with government protocols. It limits the outcomes of government responses to COVID-19 and therefore, facilitates the spread of the virus in Nigeria<sup>10</sup>. The apparent commercialization of Nigeria's response to the pandemic is a serious concern both nationally and internationally.

Despite the threat posed by the covid-19, the commercialization in its response via the falsification of figures amidst low numbers of persons tested, duplication of health care projects, outsourcing of Covid test centres, over-dependency on foreign vaccines, scarcity of test kits and drugs, Covid-test racketeering, conflicting government reports and positions, violations and inability to enforce basic rules on the part of government officials and the apparent non-activity of the Covid-19 taskforce in some northern parts of the country bring to bear the myth and reality of Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria. These contending issues have been made worse with the consequent economic and political burden the country confronts in its response to the pandemic<sup>11</sup>.

The safeguards against the issues highlighted above are strong institutions, transparency and accountability structures.

### **Faith-Based Organisations and the Mitigation of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria.**

Faith-Based Organisations have continued to play an important public role in the health sector of Nigeria. The motivation of Faith-Based Organisations in providing health care in Nigeria is borne out of the concern for the well-being of every human person, and the humanization of humanity. In Nigeria, the involvement of missionary organisations in healthcare goes back over a hundred years. The first hospital in Nigeria was established by the Roman Catholic Mission<sup>12</sup>. Medical services were some of the recruitment strategies of early missionaries in Nigeria. In other words, missionary medicine enhanced conversion to Christianity in the country. The impact of missionary medical services on Nigeria's healthcare system cannot be overstated.

It would seem from available accounts that the earliest form of western-style healthcare in Nigeria was provided by doctors brought by explorers and traders to cater for their well-being. The services were not available to the indigenes. It was the church missionaries that first established healthcare services for the people. In this regard, tribute must be paid to the Roman Catholic Mission, the Church Missionary Society (Anglican) and the American Baptist Mission. It is stated that the first healthcare facility in the country was a dispensary opened in 1880 by the Church Missionary Society in Obosi, followed by others in Onitsha and Ibadan in 1886. However, the first hospital in Nigeria was the Sacred Heart Hospital in Abeokuta, built by the Roman Catholic Mission in 1885. There are several anecdotal reports of practices within these missionary healthcare facilities to suggest that they were primarily used as tools for winning converts and expanding their fellowship. Consequently, these facilities were competitive rather than complementary. Despite this fact, they were of high quality that, by independence in 1960, mission-owned hospitals were more than government-owned hospitals<sup>13</sup>.

It could be inferred from the above that religion (the Christian faith) was an indispensable component of the healthcare system before the independence of Nigeria from Great Britain. Suffice it to say that, the contribution of Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) is potentially crucial in the achievement of the health targets of the Millennium Developmental Goals, and the post-2015 agenda for sustainable development. In Nigeria, the alignment of Faith-Based health providers with national health systems will strengthen the health care system in the country. The recognition of the fact that faith is essentially a significant driver for healthy living points to the fact that more information is needed by policymakers to understand the activities of

Faith-Based healthcare providers in the country. The assumed disregard for Faith-Based healthcare providers by the government is not unconnected with the perception that religion or faith is anti-science. However, the reality in Nigeria is that many people visit miracle centres and pray passionately for their healing instead of visiting a hospital for western medicine. Nigerians depend on "supernatural powers" for their well-being, and religion largely shapes public health issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are diverse influences of Faith-Based Organisations concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. Faith-Based Organisations have played detrimental and beneficial roles in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. During the early stage of the pandemic in the country, Faith-Based Organisations disregarded directives on restrictions imposed on social gatherings by allowing their members to congregate in large numbers and which posed a serious risk of contracting the infectious disease. Furthermore, some Faith-Based Organisations defied government-suggested quarantine rules. Having mentioned a few detrimental roles of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to state that the focus of this paper is on the beneficial role of the organizations in mitigating the pandemic in Nigeria.

A major beneficial role of Faith-Based Organisations in the mitigation of covid-19 in Nigeria is the unrelenting efforts towards assisting federal, state and local governments in curtaining the severe economic effects of the pandemic on Nigerians. Faith-Based Organisations made donations of relief materials to federal and state governments. The gesture was targeted at ameliorating the sufferings a lot of Nigerians passed through in the wake of the lockdown in the country. In some cases, the donations of relief materials were made in consonance with the private sector coalition against COVID-19 (Cacovid-19)<sup>14</sup>. Apart from the donations of relief materials to curtail the severe economic effects of covid-19 in Nigeria, Faith-Based Organisations also donated state-of-the-art ambulances, Intensive Care Units (ICUs) equipment to improve medical response to the pandemic.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God, RCCG donated 11 Intensive Care Units (ICUs) to Lagos, Ogun and Plateau state with ventilators to improve the medical response to the disease. There are the Enoch & Folu Adeboye Intensive Care Units (ICUs), Plateau State Specialist Hospital, Plateau State, Enoch & Folu Adeboye Intensive Care Units (ICUs) Redeemer's Health Centre Mowe, Ogun State and the Enoch & Folu Adebayo Intensive Care Units, Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Lagos State. This was facilitated through the RCCG Christian Social Responsibility initiative which also presented a donation of 8,000 hand sanitisers. Pastor J.G. Odesola presented the donations of 8,000 hand sanitisers, 8000 surgical facemasks & 20, 000 hand gloves at the Mainland Hospital in Yaba on behalf of the General Overseer (GO) to support the efforts of the Lagos State government to equip medical staff<sup>15</sup>.

There are other Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in Nigeria that donated relief materials to curtail the severe economic effects of covid-19 in the country. The Living Faith Church otherwise known as Winners' Chapel donated medical equipment like ambulances and test kits to Lagos and Ogun state governments during the coronavirus outbreak. The Dunamis International Gospel Centre (DIGC) has a large church auditorium in Abuja, Nigeria. The senior pastor of the Church is a medical doctor. Dr Paul Enenche and members of The Dunamis International Gospel Centre (DIGC) donated relief materials worth millions of naira to the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja to fight the spread of the covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria's capital city.

The cancellation of religious gatherings and events was eventually implemented by Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) in Nigeria. This implementation was a major COVID-19 mitigation strategy in the country. Faith-Based Organisations suspended congregational gatherings during the lockdown and engaged in collaborative work with



the government to prevent and control the transmission and outbreak of the pandemic in different parts of the country. Events to mark important religious festivals were cancelled or limited by Faith-Based Organisations to halt the transmission and spread of COVID-19. For example, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), one of the largest Pentecostal churches in Nigeria curtailed the traditional national convention of the church in August and the congress in December between the years 2020 and 2021.

Alternatives to physical religious gatherings were suggested by various churches in Nigeria as the coronavirus began to spread. One of the alternatives provided is the digital option. Online worship increased tremendously, particularly during the lockdown. The lockdown was a sort of confinement. It was a prohibition of actual church services. Participatory research shows that millions of religious adherents shunned church attendance and joined worship online, as Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) brought services into the home during the lockdown. This was a major change in the way Christians worship and evangelize. As Faith-Based Organizations looked forward to an end of the pandemic and the easing of restrictions, and more public gatherings, members of these organizations were carefully assessing how to incorporate the lessons of online worship into their regular patterns of worship and evangelization.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching consequences beyond the spread of the disease itself in Nigeria. Faith-Based Organisations played a significant role in the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country through the provision of medical facilities, relief materials and faith healing. The paper concludes that the humanitarian response of Faith-Based Organisations in mitigating the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria is beneficial

## Recommendations

The beliefs and practices of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) could strongly influence health behaviour at individual and community levels. The religious aspect of COVID-19 prevention and control in Nigeria should be integrated into healthcare channels and resources in the response to the future occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. There should be a partnership between Faith-Based Organizations and the Nigeria Centre of Disease Control (NCDC) to discuss the possible role of religious organizations in encouraging sound decision-making among religious adherents to mitigate the spread of infectious diseases in the country. Religious adherents should prioritize their loyalty to the subjective elucidation of religion over evidence-based medicine.

## Endnotes

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