

**POST-MORTEM OF THE END SARS PROTESTS AND
LOOTING OF FOOD PALLIATIVES IN THE COVID-19
CIVIL CONFLICT AS THE FAILURE OF HUMANITARIAN
INTERVENTION IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT: This paper examined the civil conflict that emerged in the form of mass violent protests across Nigeria by mostly young people in response to the humanitarian intervention policies and programmes put in place by the government to ameliorate the social hardship and economic deprivation suffered by citizens in the wake of the lockdowns imposed to contain the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. The methodology employed in this paper involves a desk review that engages both qualitative and quantitative instruments to generate and analyse secondary and primary data. Specifically, the Abuja Municipal Area Council of the Federal Capital Authority was used as the location of the study, as a total of 200 respondents who were randomly selected through purposive sampling techniques were administered questionnaires on the problem. In addition, the paper examined poverty alleviation programmes by successive governments and sought to establish a linkage between that and the subsequent civil disaffection over government humanitarian intervention. The findings revealed that there is a high rate of poverty and unemployment in the country among citizens that is endemic and caused by high-level corruption in the public sector and the global economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. In conclusion, the paper recommended that humanitarian intervention programmes be institutionalized by ensuring the effective continuity and sustainability of poverty alleviation programmes to mitigate social discontent.

Keywords: Good Governance, Poverty, Poverty Alleviation, Unemployment, Humanitarian Intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a multidimensional problem that encompasses political economy, sociology, economics, health, peace, and conflict studies and lacks a universally accepted definition. Poverty is a major economic and social disincentive facing Nigeria as a nation; the endemic level of poverty could be negatively seen in the increasing menace of kidnapping, banditry, social vices such as prostitution, criminality, robbery, farmer-herder clashes, Boko-Haram/ISWAP insurgency, Niger Delta militancy and the general incidence of insecurity of lives and property in the country (Akinmulegun, 2014).

In its 2019 “Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria” report, the National Bureau of Statistics reported that 40% of the total population, or almost 83 million people, live below the country’s poverty line of 137,430 naira (\$381.75) per year (NBS, 2020). The locations most severely affected by poverty are rural areas due to subsistence agriculture and lack of government support for viable small- and medium-scale economic programmes. Poverty has deepened in Nigeria since the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) during the era

of Babangida administration in the mid-1980s. For instance, the poverty index in the 1980s was 28.1%, which increased to 46.6% in the mid-1980s but decreased in the early 1990s. In 1996, it rose to 65.6%, while in 2010, it increased to 70.1% (World Bank, 2019).

The paper asked these fundamental research questions: why is poverty still endemic in Nigeria despite the various government intervention efforts? What are the factors responsible for the failure of the various poverty alleviation programmes of successive governments and the inability to achieve the desired objectives? What impact have the various government poverty alleviation programmes made on the lives of Nigerians since the 1970s? Was the recent hoarding and subsequent looting of COVID-19 palliatives by End SARS protesters a symptom of the failure of the government to alleviate poverty in Nigeria? What new ideas should the government deploy to ensure that poverty alleviation programmes bring about a reduction in poverty levels in the country?

In answering these questions, the paper was driven by the following objectives: examine why poverty is still endemic in Nigeria despite the various government intervention efforts, and investigate the factors responsible for the failure of the various poverty alleviation programmes to achieve the desired objectives. Further examine the impact of the various poverty alleviation programmes on the lives of Nigerian since the 1970s, and situate the hoarding and subsequent looting of COVID-19 palliatives during End SARS protest as evidence of government failure at alleviating poverty in the country. Suggest ways by which stakeholders could do a reset to ensure that poverty alleviation programmes are able to change the narrative on underdevelopment and misgovernance.

Propositions

The paper tested and analysed the underlisted propositions in the data analysis:

- i. The failure of the various poverty alleviation programmes in Nigeria and the inability to achieve the desired objectives is due to systemic corruption.
- ii. The various government poverty alleviation programmes have not made a significant impact on the lives of Nigerians since the 1970s when they were first introduced.
- iii. The hoarding and subsequent looting of COVID-19 palliatives during the End SARS protest is symptomatic of the failure of the government to alleviate poverty in Nigeria.

Some of the features of poverty are lack of basic social amenities, high unemployment, malnutrition, disease and illiteracy. With this scorecard, Nigeria may find it difficult to sustain a stable political system that could be supported by its citizens for accelerated development (World Bank, 2019). Economic development considers human living conditions, especially individual wellbeing, as a more important focus of attention than the institutions and organizations within the social system (Nwagwu, 2014). Therefore, development scholars are interested not only in the wealth of nations, which appears in the gross domestic product (GDP) and aggregate economic indicators but also in how wealth is equitably distributed among individuals and groups of people in a country or whether there is inequality in the distribution of available resources within a country.

However, poverty not only persists but also tends to exacerbate; clearly, the rate of poverty is greater in recent times than in the past. A recent indication of government failure at poverty alleviation was the hoarding of COVID-19 palliatives by state governments, which was a

fallout of the pandemic to alleviate the impact of the disease. The palliatives were looted by #EndSARS protesters with attendant destruction of lives and property (Paquette, 2020).

The significance of this research is tied to the expectation that it could lead to a concerted effort to identify, articulate and highlight the existence, causes, and effect of poverty in Nigeria, and streamline poverty reduction strategies towards making them more result-oriented and beneficial to the less privileged. It is hoped that it could provide relevant reference material to national economic planners, development partners, aid agencies, development scholars and policymakers. It is also hoped that it would generate fresh impetus on the ongoing dialectic on the linkage between poverty and underdevelopment responsible for the backwardness of developing countries.

Statement of the Problem

This researcher was motivated by the need to appraise the crisis caused by economic and social pressures on the underprivileged people during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the light of the gap found that although poverty alleviation programmes in an economy are aimed at improving the welfare of those who are categorized as poor and to build societal resilience that can resist an economic downturn, this was not the case in Nigeria. It is the government's responsibility to provide for the basic needs of its citizens. The 1999 Nigerian constitution, as amended (Chapter 2, Section 14, Sub-section B), emphatically states that the provision of security and the welfare of the people is the major mandate of the state and the primary purpose of government. However, the available statistics do not appear to suggest any remarkable improvement in the poverty situation in Nigeria. Nigeria has been consistently classified among the poorest countries in the world. In its 2019 "Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria" report, the National Bureau of Statistics reported that 40% of the total population, or almost 83 million people at that time, live below the country's poverty line of 137,430 naira (\$381.75) per year (NBS, 2020). Additionally, in 2018, the World Poverty Clock rated Nigeria as the Poverty Capital of the World Overtaking India. It has been reported that 86.9 million Nigerians live in abject poverty, which represents nearly 50% of its estimated 180 million people as of then (World Bank, 2022).

Despite the various poverty alleviation programmes by successive governments and the large budgeting outlays attached to these programmes, rural areas and citizens have remained poor. It is argued that all these are the outcome of policy inconsistencies, lack of political will, excessive bureaucratic red tape on the ease of doing business, absence of consumer-oriented consultations in policy initiation or formulation, inadequate capacity for effective policy implementation, weak regulation and enforcement of compliance with rules and regulations, obstacles arising from political and social considerations, poor leadership, inadequate support institutions and resources for policy implementation; all these issues are exacerbated by political instability and social crises (Aregbesola and Khan, 2018).

Conceptual Clarification

Good Governance

Segun (2010) describes good governance as referring to a macroeconomic policy that is monetarily healthy and promotes liberalization, but also democratization and improvement of the human rights situation in a political system, and good governance has eight major

characteristics. It is participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, that the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable people in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society.

Poverty

Since poverty affects many aspects of human health, such as physical, moral and psychological conditions, a concise and acceptable definition of poverty is elusive because it cannot be captured only by income and consumption-based measures (Eboh, E. & Uma. E, 2010).

Unemployment

The World Bank (2019) states that unemployed workers are those who are currently not working but are willing and able to work for pay, are currently available to work and have actively searched for work. Sanusi (2012) defines unemployment as the number of people not having a job, the number of people without a job, and the state of not having a job. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, Nigeria (2020), the unemployment rate in Nigeria increased from 21.1% in 2010 to 23.9% in 2011. Similarly, as of October 2023, the unemployment rate in Nigeria was approximately 17.96 percent (NBS, 2023).

Unemployment is considered to be a barrier to social progress, and preventing its undesirable consequences on poverty has made overcoming unemployment challenges difficult to meet the development objectives of emerging economies (Ozili,2020). Akinmulegun (2014) stressed that unemployment is regarded as the root of poverty in Nigeria. He argued that unemployment in Nigeria, predominantly graduate unemployment, has been phenomenal in recent decades, as a result of the sharp increase in tertiary institution turnout. Nwagwu (2014) observes that the unemployment rate is quite high despite the human and material resources that could generate employment for Nigeria, such as oil boom earnings, high revenues to the government and increased foreign reserves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19 Lockdown and Palliative Response

Palliative is an action that is intended to reduce the severity of a problem but does not actually solve the problem. Ozili (2020) noted that palliative care is specialized care for people living with disabilities or in disadvantaged conditions. This type of care is focused on providing relief to vulnerable groups. The goal is to improve the quality of life for those in such conditions and for their families. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic breakout, palliative care, otherwise known as a relief package, was used to mitigate the effect of the pandemic on people who were cut off from their jobs, businesses, farms and markets during the lockdown. At the end of February,2019, the first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was recorded in Lagos. Philanthropic responses to the pandemic generally followed two tracks: responding to the immediate crisis, such as donations of cash and in-kind items to private and public healthcare providers, and addressing the economic effects caused by strict lockdowns (Odutola, 2020).

Ozili (2020) stated that in recognition of the scale of the challenge facing the country and the ability of the Federal and State Governments to respond appropriately to it, on 27 March 2019, a private sector coalition spearheaded by the Central Bank of Nigeria with the Aliko Dangote Foundation and Access Bank announced the creation of the Coalition Against COVID (CACOVID) to mobilize private sector resources to support the government's response to the crisis. Ozili (2020) revealed that CACOVID mobilized more than \$72 million in donations, and it comprised more than 50 partner organizations, including Nestle, KPMG, MTN, Citibank, and CNN. In addition to local philanthropic donations, several in-kind and cash donations were made to the Nigerian government from multilateral aid agencies, including the EU, which gave Nigeria a grant of €50 M to address the pandemic; the UN, donated 50 A30 ventilators and personal protective supplies worth \$2.2 million; and UN Women, donated the equivalent of \$100,000 in support of the purchase and distribution of palliatives to the most vulnerable women across 14 states in Nigeria.

In addition, to providing medical equipment and isolation centres, the CACOVID also supplied palliatives of assorted food to the 36 states of the country for onwards distribution to vulnerable persons. However, there were allegations and counter allegations in the public domain that these palliatives were not effectively distributed, as many vulnerable groups were not reached, which led to public discontent. This could explain the subsequent looting of the palliatives stores in several states by angry protesters and mobs who discovered several tonnes of food being hoarded by state governments in warehouses, which were not distributed despite the hardship faced by the people in their respective states (Ademoroti, 2020).

Poverty Alleviation Programmes

Ekong (1997) posited that agricultural development projects, made up of an integrated rural development strategy proposed by the United Nations comprising three main components (rural–urban integration, intersectional and/or zonal coordination, and the package approach) was adopted. This development strategy saw the emergence of the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) in 1976, which was renamed the Green Revolution by the civilian administration in 1979, and the Agricultural Credit Guarantee Scheme (ACGS) in 1977. He added that this strategy failed to meet the food aspirations of the nation and did not uplift the poor. Other programmes specifically designed to facilitate rural development include the River Basin Development Authorities (RBDA) of 1973, the erstwhile National Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA) of 1991 and the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI) of 1986.

Archibong (1997) stated that the anti-poverty effect of these projects remains marginal. He disclosed that though NALDA encouraged smallholder farmers to bring more cultivated land, with a view to improving agricultural output and reducing household expenditure on food, it failed to achieve the goal of poverty reduction. Obadan (2002) noted that in addition to these programmes, there have been special relief package projects aimed at alleviating poverty during and after the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which was introduced in 1986 by the Ibrahim Babangida Administration. Such projects include the National Directorate of Employment (NDE); the Family Support Programme, which was later replaced by the Better Life Programme and again changed to the Family Economic Advancement Programme; the People's Bank; Community Banks; Rural Health Schemes; and the Expanded Programme on Immunization, whose purpose, among others, was to mobilize and encourage the participation of rural communities in development activities. Specifically, an extrabudgetary relief package

to the tune of N494.9 million was announced in 1989 to provide employment opportunities, improve health care delivery and reduce transportation difficulties in rural communities.

The End SARS Protest in Perspective

Paquette (2020) highlighted that the beginning of the #EndSars campaign started with the publication of a petition by the convener, a social media activist called Segun Awosanya. It was signed by 10,195 Nigerians and submitted to the Nigerian National Assembly to scrap the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) police unit. The Twitter campaign started on the 2nd of December 2017, when a footage of police officers attached to the unit who shot and killed a man surfaced online. The campaign became a trending topic on Twitter with more than 400,000 Tweets within twelve hours. In October 2020, Nigerians started reacting to the online campaign. Before the campaign, there were isolated cases of police brutality all over the country. However, during the campaign, evidence of widespread damage of civil liberties caused by brutality emerged (Odutola, 2020).

The End SARS was a decentralized social movement characterised by a series of mass protests against police brutality across the country. The slogan called for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police with a long record of abuses (Premium Times, 2020). The protests took its name from the slogan on Twitter using the hashtag #ENDSARS disbanding of the SARS police unit by the Nigerian government (Omonobi, 2017). After experiencing an upsurge in October 2020 following more revelations of abuses, mass demonstrations occurred throughout the major cities, accompanied by expressions of outrage on social media platforms. In addition, solidarity protests and demonstrations by Nigerians in the diaspora and sympathizers occurred in other major cities across the world. The protest is notable for its patronage by a demographic that is made of entirely young Nigerians (Odutola, 2020). At a point, the movement expanded to include demands for good and accountable governance.

Theoretical Framework

The two theories discussed below contextualize the theoretical framework for the research paper: structural conflict theory and social exclusion theory.

Structural Conflict Theory

Nickerson (2024) explained that the structural basis of conflict derived from the thoughts of Karl Marx is a theory that attempts to explain conflict as a product of the tension that arises when groups must compete for scarce resources. At first glance, this theory seems self-evident. We use group affiliations as an evocative shorthand when we describe some of the most intractable conflicts in history. However, while this theory may seem self-evident, it does not explain conflict universally but only finds expression when certain environmental conditions are met. The structural theory of conflict is a snapshot that describes the condition of a society but does not explain why conflict occurs within that society. However, this paper proposes that this framework is useful for explaining the context of the dynamics of group conflict that ensued during the End SARS protests.

Social Exclusion Theory

Runciman and Townsend (2024) first proposed the social exclusion theory, which was officially adopted in a World Summit that took place in Copenhagen in 1995 and holds that certain people within society become more vulnerable to poverty because of discrimination. This approach, which has been described as people-centred, is characterized by three paradigms, namely, solidarity, specialization and monopoly.

In the paradigm, different interest groups based on class, status and political power exert control over available resources. By doing so, they create inequality and form monopoly groups that tend to perpetuate power and privileges through social closure and labour market segregation, thereby enforcing exclusion. This means that the poor are not the problem but rather the inaccessibility of realistic opportunities as a result of exclusion that prevents them from escaping poverty. This theory, which also explains the factor of social exclusion by marginalized groups from the national mainstream, is a driver of grievances. This paper is strongly of the belief that societal conflict occasioned by contradictions in the structure of society and the exclusion of groups vulnerable to societal welfare is a recipe for disequilibrium and disaffection.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology is mixed-method, as fieldwork was undertaken focusing on the Federal Capital Territory as the area of study. The FCT has six area councils (LGAs), but the study area was restricted to the Abuja Municipal Area of the FCT (one of the 6 LGAs), where the stakeholders and target population for the study are located. The population of this study included residents of the Abuja Municipal Area Council, staff of government agencies and private organisations involved in poverty eradication and reduction programmes in Nigeria. A sample size of 200 was randomly and purposively selected for the study out of the 2000 population targeted as the identified population. The return rate shows that out of the 200 questionnaires administered, 182 were returned.

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1: Questionnaire Distribution

Sample of Respondents	Percent (%) allocation	Total No of Questionnaire allocated	Total No of Questionnaire Returned
1. Bank of Industry (BOI)	5%	10	8
2. National Bureau of Statistics	5%	10	8
3. Federal Ministry of Finance and National Planning	10%	20	20
4. Central Bank of Nigeria	10%	20	19
5. National Directorate of Employment	10%	20	20
6. Artisans	5%	10	10

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7. Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity	10%	20	19
8. Federal Ministry of Sport and Youth Development	10%	20	18
9. SMEDAN	10%	20	18
10. CSOs & NGOs	10%	20	16
11. Small Business Enterprises Owners (SMEs)	5%	10	8
12. General Public	10%	20	18
TOTAL	100%	200	182

Source: Field Research, 2024

The return rate shows that out of the 200 questionnaires administered, 182 were returned. This shows a 91% return rate. The analysis and data presentation were based on the returned questionnaires.

Table 2: Economic Status of Respondents

Economic Status	Frequency	Percent (%)
Employed (Public/Private)	101	55.7
Business Owner/Self-employed	54	29.1
Unemployed/Applicant	18	10.0
No response	9	5.2
Total	182	100

Source: Field Research 2024

The majority of the respondents (101, 55.7%) were employed in both the private and public sectors.

Table 3: Poverty and unemployment responsible for Nigeria's worst economic crisis

Options	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	92	50.3
Agree	42	23.2
Undecided	10	5.6
Disagree	20	11.0
Strongly Disagree	18	9.9
Total	182	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Ninety-two (50.3%) respondents strongly agreed with the notion that poverty and unemployment are the causal factors for the worst economic crisis during COVID-19.

Table 4: Economic crisis in developing countries caused by the global financial crisis

Options	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	75	41.1
Agree	53	29.2
Undecided	9	4.7
Disagree	26	14.4
Strongly Disagree	19	10.6
Total	182	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Overall, 75 (41.1%) respondents strongly agreed with the position that economic crises in developing countries are caused by global financial crises, while another 53 (29.2%) endorsed it. But 19 (10.6%) respondents strongly disagreed, 26 (14.4%) further disagreed, and the remaining 9 (4.7%) were undecided.

Table 5: Poverty and unemployment rates in Nigeria were worsened by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Option	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	107	58.6
Agree	35	19.3
Undecided	4	2.1
Disagree	19	10.7
Strongly Disagree	17	9.3
Total	182	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

One hundred and seven (58.6%) respondents strongly agreed with the claim that the poverty and unemployment rates in Nigeria were worsened by the COVID-19 outbreak, while another 35 (19.3%) supported it. Seventeen (9.3%) respondents strongly disagreed, 19 (10.7%) also disagreed, and the remaining 4 (2.1%) were undecided.

Table 6: Humanitarian intervention in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria failed due to poor coordination and ineffective monitoring

Option	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	57	31.2
Agree	79	43.2
Undecided	16	8.6
Disagree	19	10.7
Strongly Disagree	11	6.3
Total	182	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Fifty-seven (31.2%) respondents strongly agreed that poverty alleviation in Nigeria failed due to poor coordination and effective monitoring of poverty alleviation programmes, while

another 79 (43.2%) also endorsed this position. Eleven (6.3%) respondents strongly disagreed, 19 (10.7%) further disagreed, and the remaining 16 (8.6%) respondents were undecided.

Table 7: High-level corruption responsible for endemic poverty in Nigeria

Option	Frequency	(%) Frequency
Strongly Agree	83	45.7
Agree	37	20.4
Undecided	7	4.1
Disagree	34	18.5
Strongly Disagree	21	11.3
Total	182	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Eighty-three (45.7%) respondents strongly agreed that high-level corruption is the reason why poverty is still endemic in Nigeria despite various government poverty alleviation intervention efforts, while another 37 (20.4%) also affirmed. Twenty-one (11.3%) respondents strongly disagreed with this claim, 34 (18.5%) opposed it, and the remaining 7 (4.1%) respondents were undecided.

Table 8: Lack of sustainability of poverty alleviation programmes responsible for its failure

Option	Frequency	(%) Frequency
Strongly Agree	95	50.3
Agree	44	23.2
Undecided	11	5.6
Disagree	21	11.0
Strongly Disagree	19	9.9
Total	182	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Ninety-five (50.3%) respondents strongly agreed that the failure of government poverty alleviation programmes was due to a lack of continuity and sustainability of the programmes by successive governments, another 44 (23.2%) shared this view. Nineteen (9.9%) respondents strongly opposed it, 21 (11.0%) further opposed it, and the remaining 11 (5.6%) respondents were undecided.

Table 9: The looting of COVID-19 palliatives by End SARS protesters was a symptom of the government's failure to alleviate poverty in Nigeria

Option	Frequency	(%) Frequency
Strongly Agree	112	61.3
Agree	18	9.9
Undecided	10	5.4
Disagree	13	7.2
Strongly Disagree	29	16.2
Total	182	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

One hundred and twelve (61.3%) respondents strongly agreed with the perception that the hoarding and subsequent looting of COVID-19 palliatives during the End SARS protest was symptomatic of the failure of governments to alleviate poverty in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The researcher concludes based on the outcome of the study that poverty and unemployment are still increasing in Nigeria despite the various humanitarian interventions and government poverty alleviation programmes. This has been adduced by high-level public-sector corruption, poor policy coordination, ineffective implementation and monitoring of poverty alleviation and humanitarian intervention programmes, lack of continuity and sustainability of the programmes by successive governments, absence of achievable target goals in the design of poverty alleviation programmes, severe low budgetary allocation, mismanagement and bad governance, which have affected the success of poverty alleviation and humanitarian programmes in Nigeria. The global economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was also a major causal factor of the country's economic downturn. The results from the data analysis clearly supported the position of Runciman and Townsend (2024), proponents of the social exclusion theory which pointed out that exclusion of vulnerable groups from the societal mainstream and opportunities can be triggers for social conflict. This means that being poor is not the problem, but rather the lack access to realistic national opportunities as a result of exclusion that prevents discriminated groups from escaping poverty thereby breeding social discontent. This theory, which also explains the factor of social exclusion by marginalized groups from the national mainstream, is a driver of grievances. In Nigeria, the analysis showed that the absence of creativity in designing poverty alleviation and humanitarian intervention programmes is also responsible for increasing, rather than lowering the poverty index. This new revelation should encourage policy makers and development partners to introduce new paradigms in designing development policies, rather than rehashing old unsuccessful templates that have not helped developing countries to escape the grip of poverty and underdevelopment.

Recommendations

Stakeholders should focus on good governance and anti-corruption strategies to address the negative influence of corruption on poverty alleviation programmes and humanitarian intervention. There should be effective synergy, coordination and monitoring of humanitarian intervention programmes among stakeholders in the public and private sectors to achieve targets and goals. The continuity and sustainability of poverty alleviation programmes should be institutionalized and not be subjected to the political considerations of successive administrations. Adequate budgetary allocation and prudent financial management must be provided to guard against programme failure. The collaborative effort of mass employment strategies between the public and private sectors should urgently be prioritized to gainfully engage youths and drastically reduce disaffection on the streets.

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