

GOVERNANCE, THE PLIGHT OF THE ELDERLY AND THE SEARCH FOR AN INCLUSIVE SOCIAL ORDER IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: The increasing search for a better life for the elderly in Nigerian society makes it imperative to explore the link between governance and the plight of the elderly as a way of building an inclusive social order. Through governance, which entails the deployment of an administrative system to regulate components of society for the purpose of promoting inclusiveness, the plight and peculiarities of the elderly could be improved in order to attain a more humane social order. This paper relies on the qualitative description analysis predicated on the use of secondary data to project governance as a driver for the improvement of the plight of the elderly in the country. This paper, which adopts the Social Exchange Theory, finds that poor governance reflected in the failure to deploy available machinery to cater for the needs of the elderly result in the deplorable social well-being of the aged in Nigeria. The paper recommends, among others, the deployment of governance structure and the machineries toward the betterment of the wellbeing of the elderly. These should manifest in timely payment of pension benefits, expansion of access to healthcare, and creation of more legislation on a wide range of issues that could provide a durable cover for the elderly in Nigerian society.

Keywords: Administrative System, Elderly, Governance, Inclusive, Plight, Social Order

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, the international community has witnessed a growing number of aged persons, with western countries experiencing more of the elderly while developing countries of Asia, Latin America, and Africa have recorded a smaller number of elderly persons (Tanyil, Andrel & Mbah, 2018). This trend has shown that between 2006 and 2020, there has been an increase of 140% of the elderly in developing countries, while that of developed countries grew by 51.0% (Mobolaji, 2024).

The demographic landscape of Nigeria is shifting and according to Ogunniyi, Akanji and Baiyewu, (2020), they argued that the National Population Commission (NPC) have reported that the population of individuals aged 60 years and above is expected to rise to approximately 10% by 2030, highlighting the need for comprehensive geriatric care. This increase is driven by improvements in healthcare and a decline in fertility rates. However, the support systems traditionally relied upon by the elderly- primarily familial are increasingly under strain due to urban migration and changing cultural dynamics (Ogunniyi et al., 2020). Similarly, the National

Housing and Population (2006), based on its last result, revealed that Nigeria has approximately 200 million people, with about 7% aged 60 and above, representing approximately 14 million individuals.

Considering some of the challenges that the elderly in Nigeria are facing, the Federal Government has responded with some policies and support programmes. Some of these policies and programmes carried out by the authorities in the country included the National Policy on Aging. However, implementation has been inconsistent and often underfunded. A report by the United Nations (2020) criticized the lack of comprehensive strategies to address the diverse needs of the elderly, highlighting gaps in healthcare, social security, and community support.

Community-based programs aimed at supporting the elderly exist but are often limited in scope and reach, particularly as a result of population explosion. Research by Eze et al., (2022) indicates that many older adults are unaware of available resources, resulting in unmet needs. Moreover, the effectiveness of existing programs is hindered by inadequate funding and poor coordination among agencies. Thus, it is in line with this background that this paper attempts to achieve the following objectives:

- i. Highlight the plight of the elderly in Nigeria;
- ii. To investigate the daunting challenges facing the elderly in Nigeria;
- iii. Explain the factors responsible for suffering among the elderly in Nigeria; and
- iv. Proffer recommendations on how to address the plight of the elderly through inclusive governance for the attainment of inclusive social order in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Several social science concepts were used frequently throughout this work and require clarification as they were used within the context of this paper to give insight into how good governance would serve as a foundation for social order snowballing into improving the living conditions of the elderly in Nigeria. The conceptual clarifications are as follows:

Governance

Governance mainly entails an administrative system of control and regulation sanctioned by law in order to promote the general well-being of the population. Ademolekun (2002) sees governance as a process of exercising power to manage a state. It regulates responsibility, participation, and responsiveness guided by accepted standards so as to engender public welfare and happiness. In this paper, governance is viewed with respect to the Nigerian state, whose role, among others, includes the efforts to respond to the needs and expectations of the aged or elderly in society as part of an effort to promote inclusiveness toward the building of a virile social order.

The Elderly

The concept of the elderly depends typically on the culture of different societies. Generally, elders are seen as a demographic category who are advanced in age because of which there are changes

in their social role, capabilities, and levels of commitment and active contribution to the social development. The United Nations gave the cut-off age of 60 years and above as an elderly stage (United Nations, 2017). In this paper, people who are above 60 years old and witness changes in their physical characteristics and social role, because of which they need special management of their plight through inclusive governance in Nigeria, are regarded as the elderly.

Social Order

This entails the way society is structured. It involves how a tranquil and harmonious society is built so that inclusiveness manifests in social and economic privileges and rights. In this study, social order revolves around the deployment of regulatory and administrative structures to better the living conditions of the elderly in Nigeria as a way of promoting inclusiveness and building a justice-oriented society as a key element of a durable social order.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION AND METHODOLOGY

The paper is framed around the social exchange theory to explain the plight of the elderly in Nigeria. The theory has its roots in the Rational Choice Theories propounded by early economists such as Adams Smith, J.B. Say, and John Stuart Smith. According to Johnson (2008), some of the proponents of the theory are Gorge C. Homans, Peter Blau, B.F. Skinner, and Peter Ekeh, among others. The central theme of this theory is that social behaviour is a result of an exchange process wherein individuals assess the costs and benefits of their interactions with others. The theory further posits that individuals are prone to withdraw from engaging in a particular relationship (exchange process) when the costs of being involved in an exchange process outweigh the benefits proposed or present interactions.

Applying this theory to explain this paper means that in caring for the elderly in Nigeria, families often engage in a cost-benefit analysis, weighing the emotional, financial, and social rewards against the obligations and sacrifices involved in caregiving.

Similarly, this means that Nigerians traditionally emphasize the importance of familial support systems, particularly in the context of elder care. This aligns with the social exchange theory, as individuals may provide care to their relatives with the expectation of receiving emotional and social rewards in return. These rewards can include the reinforcement of familial bonds, social prestige, and the fulfilment of cultural expectations surrounding respect for elders. Conversely, if caregivers perceive the costs—such as time, financial resources, and emotional strain—to outweigh the perceived benefits, they may reconsider their commitment to caregiving.

Reciprocity plays a crucial role in maintaining familial relationships in Nigeria. The expectation of reciprocal care—where younger generations care for their ageing parents with the understanding that they, too, will receive support in their later years—fuels the motivation to provide care. This form of exchange is rooted in cultural values that prioritize family loyalty and interdependence, suggesting that relationships are sustained through mutual support and benefits. The concept of Comparison Levels (CL) is also relevant in this context. Caregivers often assess their situation based on previous experiences and societal norms regarding elder care. Expectations can be

influenced by media representations of family dynamics, cultural teachings, and the experiences of peers, which can shape what caregivers believe they should receive in return for their support. When these expectations are met, caregivers may feel more satisfied and committed to their roles, thus reinforcing the caregiver-elder relationship.

In addition to tangible benefits, social exchange theory highlights the emotional dimensions of caregiving. Fulfilling caregiving roles can produce positive emotions, feelings of cohesion, and a sense of solidarity. However, when the perceived rewards are lacking, individuals may experience feelings of resentment or burnout, which can threaten the stability of the caregiving arrangement. This emotional evaluation is crucial as it affects caregivers' willingness to continue their support.

The theory then gives into the plight of the elderly in Nigeria. This explains that family members or caregivers of the individuals are prone to withdraw from engaging in a particular relationship (exchange process) of caring for the poor because they see them as a burden and the costs involved in caring for them outweigh the benefits proposed or present interactions. This consequently results in their neglect and eventual suffering despite contributing their quarter in their youthful age to bring about social order and development in the country.

At the methodological stage, the study explored the use of extant literature published in peer-reviewed journals, textbooks, and online materials. The paper also used content analysis of official documents from available secondary data published by relevant authorities.

The Plight of the Elderly in Nigeria

The plight of the elderly in Nigeria can be seen and assessed from different angles, and one such angle is the healthcare delivery sector. Older Nigerians face significant health challenges, often exacerbated by limited access to healthcare services. Common health issues among the elderly include non-communicable diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and arthritis. A study by Akinyemi et al., (2019) found that many elderly individuals suffer from multiple chronic conditions, which complicate treatment and increase healthcare costs.

Healthcare access remains a critical barrier. The World Health Organization (2021) reports that many rural areas lack adequate medical facilities equipped to cater to the needs of older adults. Additionally, the financial burden of healthcare, particularly for those without insurance or pension plans, prevents many from seeking necessary medical attention (Okunola & Ajayi, 2022). Similarly, economic vulnerability is a pervasive issue among the elderly in Nigeria. The poverty rate among older adults is alarmingly high, with many living on less than \$1 a day. A report by the National Bureau of Statistics (2021) indicates that a significant proportion of the elderly rely on informal support from family, which can be inconsistent and unreliable.

The pension system in Nigeria is notably underdeveloped. While formal-sector employees may have access to pension schemes, a large percentage of older individuals, particularly those who have spent their lives in the informal economy, lack any form of retirement benefits (Uwaifo, 2020). The absence of a comprehensive social safety net leaves many elderly individuals vulnerable to economic hardship, exacerbating their plight.

Cultural perceptions of ageing play a significant role in the experiences of older adults in Nigeria. Traditionally, older individuals were revered and respected within families and communities. However, with increasing urbanization, younger generations are often migrating to cities, leaving their elderly relatives behind. This shift has led to a rise in social isolation, which has detrimental effects on mental health (World Health Organization, 2021).

A study by Onifade et al. (2021) highlights the psychological impact of loneliness among the elderly, noting that many experience depression and anxiety due to a lack of social interaction and support. The traditional family structure, which provided a safety net for older adults, is increasingly eroded, contributing to their marginalization.

Though the Nigerian government has initiated some policy actions to ameliorate the pains emanating from the daunting challenges faced by the elderly in Nigeria, the Federal Government has responded with some policies and support programmes. Some of these policies and programmes carried out by the authorities in the country included the National Policy on Aging. However, implementation has been inconsistent and often underfunded. A report by the United Nations (2020) criticized the lack of comprehensive strategies to address the diverse needs of the elderly, highlighting gaps in healthcare, social security, and community support.

Community-based programs aimed at supporting the elderly exist but are often limited in scope and reach. Research by Eze et al. (2022) indicates that many older adults are unaware of available resources, resulting in unmet needs. Moreover, the effectiveness of existing programs is hindered by inadequate funding and poor coordination among agencies.

Considering the different sectors where the needs of the elderly are not adequately catered for in the country, there is a need for serious advocacy for the rights and needs of the elderly to be catered for. Though there has been a growing movement among Community-Based Organizations (CBOS) and None Governmental Organizations (NGOs), there is still a need for sustained, continuous campaigns to raise awareness and promote the welfare of older adults. These sustained, continuous campaigns must tackle the issue of engaging with policymakers to develop and implement effective programs that could address the plight of the elderly in Nigeria. More fundamentally, there is also the need to revisit the age-long tradition or culture of accommodating the elderly in African societies.

The Challenges Facing the Elderly in Nigeria

There are several challenges facing the elderly in Nigeria, and one of the challenges is the prevalence of non-communicable diseases. The burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) among the elderly in Nigeria is significant. A study by Oguoma et al. (2018) indicates that hypertension affects nearly 60% of older adults, with diabetes and cardiovascular diseases also prevalent. Lifestyle choices, including poor diet and sedentary behaviour, often exacerbate these conditions.

Inadequate access to healthcare services is another major challenge faced by the elderly in Nigeria. Many rural areas in Nigeria lack adequate healthcare infrastructure. A study by Adebayo et al.

(2019) found that less than 40% of elderly individuals in rural communities have access to healthcare services, which limits their ability to manage chronic conditions effectively. Financial constraints are a major barrier to better living conditions. According to the World Health Organization (2020), the majority of elderly Nigerians find it difficult to afford food, shelter, and clothing and even pay out-of-pocket for medical expenses, which can lead to increased morbidity among the elderly in the country.

Another challenge facing the elderly in Nigeria is economic vulnerability, which significantly affects the health of older adults. Uwaifo (2020) reports that nearly 60% of the elderly live below the poverty line, leading to inadequate access to healthcare and nutrition. This economic strain often forces them to rely on family members for support, which can be inconsistent.

Similarly, the absence of proper pension system that cares for improved living condition of many elderly persons in country is a challenge faced by the elderly in Nigeria. The absence of the formal pension systems for many elderly individuals contributes to financial insecurity. Fagbemi *et al.*, (2021) noted that less than 10% of elderly Nigerians receive any form of pension, placing them at higher risk for economic hardship.

Another challenge affecting the living conditions of the elderly in Nigeria is environmental issues. This is because several elderly individuals live in inadequate housing conditions that can negatively impact their health. Poor sanitation and lack of access to clean water are prevalent in low-income communities. A study by Eze *et al.* (2019) highlights the correlation between poor living conditions and health outcomes among the elderly. Also, exposure to environmental pollutants also leads to health complications, particularly respiratory issues among the elderly. The Nigerian Institute for Medical Research (2021) reported that urban pollution is a significant health risk for vulnerable populations, including the elderly.

Still, in relation to the challenges faced by the elderly in Nigeria, challenging family relations and limited community support to the elderly have been affecting the elderly in Nigeria. This has consequently started resulting in socially isolating the aged in society (Akinyemi *et al.*, 2020). Onifade *et al.* (2021) noted that over 50% of elderly respondents in urban areas reported feelings of loneliness, which can adversely affect their mental health and well-being. Similarly, a study by Akinyemi *et al.* (2020) highlighted that participation in community activities is linked to improved mental health outcomes among older adults. However, many elderly individuals lack access to such opportunities.

Taking diets with improper nutrients is a significant determinant of health in older adults. Okwuosa *et al.* (2021) noted that many elderly Nigerians face food insecurity and lack access to a balanced diet. A study by Okwuosa *et al.* (2021) found that malnutrition is common among the elderly, contributing to worsened health outcomes. By and large, sedentary lifestyles are prevalent among older adults, particularly those who are socially isolated. Akinola *et al.* (2020) emphasize that lack of physical activity is a risk factor for chronic diseases, highlighting the need for community-based interventions to promote active lifestyles.

Lastly, the issue of stigmatization against the aged in Nigeria negatively affects the social interaction and treatment of the aged by the younger population. According to Oduwole et al. (2019), negative perceptions of aging contribute to the marginalization of elderly individuals, discouraging them from seeking medical care and participating in social activities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper argued that the plight of the aged in Nigeria is a pressing issue that threatens sustainable social order and manifests symptoms of poor governance. As the population ages, it is imperative that policymakers prioritize the needs of older adults, ensuring they receive the support and care they deserve. Collaborative efforts from tiers of government are essential for creating an inclusive society that values and cares for its elderly population. These responses, as part of the management efforts against deprivations faced by the elderly as highlighted in this paper, are essential for the formation of a virile social order

This paper also concluded that the challenges faced by the elderly in Nigeria are multifaceted and rooted in political, socio-economic, cultural attitudes and environmental conditions prevailing in the country. Lastly, the paper concluded that addressing these challenges required a comprehensive approach that includes improving access to healthcare delivery, enhancing social support systems, and promoting awareness and education to improve the quality of life for older adults in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings above regarding the challenges and the plight of the elderly as a result of poor governance in Nigeria, the paper recommends that

- i. More proactive governance at all tiers of government in Nigeria should be provided as essential response to the plight of the elderly in Nigeria. The creating of a formal pension arrangement for the elderly as part of greater financial inclusion and security measure for them.
- ii. Provision of an accessible and affordable healthcare insurance policy and program by all tiers of government in Nigeria to assists in ameliorating the health challenges of the elderly as a demographic category.
- iii. Authorities in Nigeria needs to embark on national campaign. public enlighten and sensitizations on the importance of the citizens to always preserve the cultural and traditional norms that have in the past assisted in caring for the elderly in country. This will significantly help the citizens maintain the traditional treatment of the elderly.
- iv. The governance at all level must create social safety nets to improve the disadvantaged-poor elderly persons. This can be achieved by creating a social register that will serve as an instrument for giving them some form financial empowerment but also strictly following the register so as to improve their living conditions and maintain their social inclusiveness in the society.

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