

## **Socialscientia Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities**

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Online access: <https://journals.aphriapub.com/index.php/SS/>

# **IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: EXPRESSIONS OF INEQUALITY AND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES AMONG INFORMAL WORKERS IN SELECTED SOUTHEAST STATES NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the downsides of COVID-19, especially its impact on inequality and the corresponding survival strategies employed by informal workers during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the Southeast region of Nigeria. The paper employs social inclusion as an explanatory framework and qualitative methods of data collection, particularly in-depth and key informant interviews to explore the negative aspects of COVID-19 on informal workers. Findings show that the major impact of adhering to basic COVID-19 guidelines by informal workers are, among others, little or no routine daily income, insufficient funds to enable strict adherence to basic pandemic guidelines, insufficient daily supplies to feed family, dependents, and so on. The coping strategies are: skipping afternoon meals, sourcing palliatives from churches and wealthy relatives, resort to compulsory fasts among others. The paper concludes that inequality elicits strong expressions of marginalization, and deprivation among informal workers which is heightened in the face of a pandemic.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, pandemic, culture, poverty, inequality, informal, workers, social, exclusion.

### **Introduction**

The impact of the global pandemic on informal workers remains sketchy and accounts of their diverse experiences and expressions of inequality during the series of national and local lockdowns remain vague in existing literature especially from the global South. This notwithstanding, one of the United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030 is goal 10 which is targeted at 'reducing inequality' (United Nations SDGs, 2019). Inequality seems to continue unabated even in 2021 and has been heightened with the outbreak of COVID-19 especially in the developing world particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is important therefore to highlight that there is no sector of human society that has not felt the brunt of the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic whether they are formal or informal sectors. Arguably, it seems easier to capture the statistics and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the formal sector than the informal sector. This challenge may be due to several factors including the absence of data and relevant structures that oversee the activities of individuals and groups in the informal sector and the face of a global pandemic, this comes with lots of downsides. Manderson and Levine, (2020) observed that one of the risks, fears, and fall-out of COVID-19 is 'loss of income for people in the informal economy who run

stalls and street-side services' and jobs but this may not be the case across all countries. This realization of the inadequate capture of the plights of informal workers spells out double inequality in disguise. It is however pertinent to state that the deep individual and collective experiences may not be captured only with statistics, hence the need for a qualitative study to explore the prevailing themes emerging from a critical exploration of their experiences and socio-economic impacts of the strict adherence to the coronavirus guidelines on the informal workers in Nigeria.

The informal labour sector includes all economic activities owned by non-statutory workers and economic units that in practice are not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements (Kiaga, 2020). Informal workers include domestic workers, street hawkers and market traders, waste scavengers, road-side vendors, artisans, agricultural workers, and private transport operators, and other daily wage workers and non-wage workers. In most developing countries, these categories of workers do not receive social protection, gratuity, pension, and/or contributions from employers and in most cases, many informal workers are self-employed (Bonnet, Vanek, and Chen, 2019). The distinguishing factor is that informal workers do not have institutional recognition, neither are they covered by minimum wage laws and trade union organizations, and most government healthcare insurance schemes in the developing world do not capture the healthcare needs of informal workers. In the words of Lewis, (1963) informal workers' expressions reflect that institutions in their country do not serve their needs and interests. As a result, they are exposed to low income, poor wages, and job insecurity, and poverty, uncertainties associated with daily earnings or inconsistent periodic wages, and socio-economic exploitations.

Despite these issues of deprivations, it is reasonable to highlight a few contributions of the informal sector as this sector provides employment for the poor and absolves people with low-level education who are unable to get employment in the formal sector. It is the highest employer of labour in Sub-Saharan African countries (excluding South Africa). Most informal workers are low-income earners who are exposed to precarious working conditions and inadequate social protection (UNDP, 2020). Informal workers operate at a small scale owing to socio-economic circumstances and the absence of sustainable capital needed to expand their economic interests. These classes of workers are vulnerable members of society. They are susceptible to impoverishment, hunger, and diseases due to a lack of social protection and livelihood support as a result of governments' indirect suppression and low intervention programs for those in the informal sector. The impact of this reality worsens with the global and national lockdowns/shut-downs on movements aimed at reducing interpersonal and community infection and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Informal workers depend on daily earnings (Bonnet, Vanek & Chen, 2019; Obiakor, 2020; UNDP, 2020). This notwithstanding, these COVID-19 guidelines including the various palliative efforts failed to take cognizance of its impact of the pandemic on the daily survival of informal income earners. Arguably, to a large extent, the survival of the low-income informal workers is tied to daily access to food, shelter, and health services which are determined by daily income and whims of the market (Obiakor, 2020). This is why it has been postulated that Covid-19 will have the greatest impact on the informal labours which includes, street trading, vendors, domestic workers, transport workers, repairs and service providers, rural peasants who are involved in producing food and essential needs for the urban markets and other categories of weekly and daily income earners (Obiakor, 2020; UNDP, 2020; ILO, 2020).

Following from the above issues raised, this paper explores the impact, expressions of inequality, and survival strategies adopted by informal workers in selected towns in two states out of the five states of Southeastern Nigeria during the COVID-19 lockdowns through these specific research objectives: Firstly, the paper is set to identify the informal workers in the selected areas of study and ascertain their routine activities, sources of subsistence and sustenance before the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria; secondly, explore the survival strategies of informal workers during the COVID-19 lockdowns/social distancing guidelines; capture the expressions of inequality while adhering to the currently ravaging COVID-19 pandemic guidelines in Nigeria. Finally, identify the survival strategies of informal workers during the COVID-19 lockdowns/social distancing guidelines.

### **History of Global Pandemics**

Diseases and illnesses have afflicted human society since the history of mankind. As early as 412 BC the occurrences of pandemics have been captured (Barreto, 2020; Lattanzi, 2008). These pandemics come in waves and their points of origin differ in time and space (Cohn, 2012; Wang, Wang, & Li, 2015). The first documented plague was the Athenian plague of 430-26 BC found in Greek writings (Huremović, 2019) believed to be either smallpox or measles with an estimated 5 million global death. The first report of the influenza epidemic was 1173-4 while a series of other reports were from the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century (Potter, 2001). The Japanese smallpox epidemic of 735-737 (1 million death), black death of 1347-1351(200 million death), new world smallpox outbreak of 1520 (56 million deaths) (Cunha, 2004; Huremović, 2019; Katz, 2006). Next, was the great plague of London in 1665 (100,000 deaths), the Italian plague of 1629-1631 (1 million deaths), the cholera pandemics 1-6 happened between 1817-1923 (1 million-plus). There was the third plague of 1885 (12 million in China and India), yellow fever of the late 1800s (100,000-150,000 in the United States). Others are the Russian flu of 1889-1890 (1 million deaths), Spanish flu of 1918-1919 (40-50 million deaths) (Lepan, 2020), and recently, the Coronavirus.

The novel coronavirus now called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV), COVID-19 respiratory illness was first identified in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China in 2019 (CDC, 2019), and declared a global pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020 by the World Health Organization. It belongs to the family of Coronaviridae, the order Nidovirales, and the genus Coronavirus (Berhanu, Desalegn, and Kandi, 2020). It is believed to be capable of causing severe diseases in bats, cats, dogs, camels, pigs, mice, and chickens including humans. Its symptoms include high fever, chills, coughs, and difficulty in breathing. It is directly transmitted through direct and indirect contact of mucus membranes (eyes, nose, or mouth) with infectious droplets (Berhan et al., 2020). It has been noted that no disease outbreak reached such pandemic levels as Covid-19 (Lepan, 2020). On a global scale, there are over 23 million people have being affected as of August 2020 (Barreto, 2020) and as of 28<sup>th</sup> October 2020 there is about 44million cases, 29.8million, and 1.17million deaths worldwide, while Nigeria accounts for over 62,371 confirmed cases, 3,137 active cases, 58,095 discharged cases, and 1139 deaths as at the time of writing this paper (NCDC, 2020). This comes with implications for the national economy and household incomes. At the national economic level, UNCTAD (2020) predicts that COVID-19 will depress global economic growth for 2020 to below 2.5% with concomitant implications, including, uneven income distribution and the downward spiral of global economies especially amongst developing economies such as Africa.

This prediction is already taking its toll on the oil export-dependent Nigerian economy which has witnessed a 55% decline in oil prices between the end of 2019 (UNCTAD, 2019).

The fast spread of COVID-19 can be attributed to a lot of factors mainly migration, increased trade routes, increased human and animal interactions (zoonosis), and the growth of urban areas (Lepan, 2020). Urban areas are the hub of the economically active age group where informal labour is found (UNDP, 2020). Overcrowding in open/local markets, churches, shopping malls, squatter-settlements, and slums which are the domain of informal workers in city centers may intensify the nature and rate of community spread. Similarly, the increase in rural-urban migration may also fuel interpersonal and community spread. The rate of interpersonal, community, national, and global spread is essentially driven by migration generally. Bonnet et al (2019) and Kiaga (2020) remarked that the African economy is largely informal sector-oriented and this has a lot of implications. People in the informal economic sector mostly reside in urban centers (Onyebueke, 2011). Again, the informal sector accounts for 61% of the employed population globally (Bonnet, et al, 2019), and 85.8% of employment in Africa (ILO, 2020). It also accommodates 90% of employment in low-income developing countries, 67% in upper-middle and low middle income emerging countries, and 18% in high-income developed countries (Bonnet et al, 2019). Therefore, disruption in socio-economic patterns of informal workers will have consequences on individual workers, their families, dependents, and national income as a result of social exclusion occasioned by the outbreak of COVID-19.

### **Social Exclusion as an Explanatory Framework**

Social exclusion is a concept used in describing a state of deprivation, limited access to resources and opportunities such as unemployment, poor skills, poor housing arrangements, low income, bad health, and low income (Jehoel-Gijbers and Vrooman, 2007). Exclusion is a process of powerlessness and inaccessibility to forces that promotes inclusion. It is restrictive and embodies structural expressions of constraints (Yanicki, Kushner, & Reutter, 2015). Exclusion may be economic or socio-cultural. From an economic perspective, the exclusion is deprivation in income needed to meet basic needs, material goods, and access to social rights including employment, social security, housing, and legal aid. From a socio-cultural perspective, it involves an insufficient level of social integration which manifests in a lack of access to formal and informal networks needed for cultural integration, empowerment, and social involvement. "Social exclusion describes a state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state" (UN, 2016). Exclusion emphasizes the social facet of poverty over a relatively long time (Beuran and Kalugina, 2005)

Somerville (1998) and Nolan and Whelan (1996) opined that social exclusion is synonymous with poverty. Quoting the UN (2016) concept of poverty, Mack (2016) noted that poverty denotes "social discrimination and exclusion", occasioned by "lack of participation in decision-making in civil, social and cultural life". It is important to note that discourses on exclusion and inclusion are identity-driven. The lack of access may be a result of some embodied identities like ethnicity, gender, age, disability, employment, and income factors. Amongst the above, economic factor, including income level is most significant because of its multifarious implications in the determination of social status and social mobility, especially among informal sector workers. Develtere and Durme (2000) observed that the existence of the informal sector

in itself is a consequence of the exclusion of many social groups. Informal workers are low wage daily income earners (Bonnet et al, 2019; Obiakor, 2020; UNDP, 2020), low income is a result of inequality. Unlike the formal workers, informal workers may not easily access financial loans which are vital for the sustenance of small-scale businesses. Develtere and Durme (2000) posited that informal workers belong to the marginalized group, whose jobs are regarded as bad, with unacceptable income, while the formal sector works are treated as decent jobs with acceptable income, satisfactory working conditions, and job security. This disparity deepens the social exclusion of the poor informal workers and worsens it in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aside from the income level, job status also defines inclusion and exclusion levels. The underprivileged that do not have requisite formal education are disenfranchised from most formal sector jobs which require formal educational certification. Deprivation is a major reason for the transition into the informal workforce. Individuals with a low level of education are deprived of chances of upward social mobility. Besides, the Nigerian labour market is a structured labour system that excludes people from securing better jobs due to a lack of social contacts. Social relationships are built along class lines. The privileged class may offer better job opportunities to their class members, than other social classes, thus deepening social exclusion. Social exclusion results in deprivation. Deprivation leads to a lack of access to sustainable economic opportunities. With governments' non-inclusive response and intervention, including shut-downs on movements due to the need for social and physical distancing measures, aimed at curtailing the spread of COVID-19, the lives of informal low-income workers, whose survival are incidentally determined by daily earnings from the whims of the market are threatened. Lack of economic capacity emanating from the restriction on cross-border movements and closure of business enterprises have negative effects on household income, nutritional needs, clothing, shelter, and financial capacity to purchase medical needs. The prevailing COVID-19 pandemic sustains social exclusion and may lead to restiveness, hunger, poverty, escalation of social vices. Restiveness had already sprung up with the discovery of hoarded palliatives by various state governments across Nigeria which was stirred up through the "endSARS" protests across Nigeria championed by the youths. The survival strategies employed by informal workers in selected areas in Southeast Nigeria has been reported in the result section of this paper as coping strategies.

## Methods

This qualitative study was conducted in purposively selected towns- Okigwe in Imo State and Awka-South Anambra State respectively, all in Southeastern Nigeria shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown was eased. Okigwe is one of the 27 Local Government Areas and the third-largest urban area in Imo State after Owerri and Orlu. It covers a land area of about 1,824km<sup>2</sup> and has a population size of 132,237 according to the National Population Census of 2006. It is essentially made up of immigrant workers drawn from neighboring states of Enugu, Anambra, and Abia. Anambra has Awka as its capital and occupies about 4,844 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 4,177,821 (NPC, 2006). These two states are indigenous to the Igbo ethnic group who are widely known for their entrepreneurial skills. The study areas were purposively selected as they harbor a lot of informal workers just like other states in Nigeria. The study involved 19 randomly aged between 18-60 years old selected informal workers as study participants (11 males and 8 females) and the fieldwork lasted between June to October 2020.

The brief background, occupations, locations and gender of the study participants are described below: 1. Carpenter, Male, 53, Umuchima street Okigwe. 2. A 23yrs female, Beans and plaiIntain seller at Ike road Okigwe; 3. A 36yrs old female Restaurant operator and soap maker at Ndiakweke Street; 4. Hair dresser, Ndiakweke street Female; 5. A 29yrs, female Cloth seller, Ndiakweke street Okigwe; 6. 31yrs female, hair dresser, Ndiakweke street; 7. 26yrs male, Laundry shop owner, Ndiakweke street Okigwe; 8. 38yrs male, Aluminum fabricator, Ndiakweke street Okigwe; 9. A 46 male, Motorcycle spare part seller, Okpara road Okigwe; 10. 46 years old male, Vulcanizer, at Abakaliki Street Awka;11. 42 years old male welder, Okpara road, Okigwe; 12. 36 years old Radio and TV repairer, Okpara road Okigwe; 13. 28 years old female, tailor, Unizik Junction Awka;14. 50 years old female firewood seller, Eke Awka road; 15. 33 years old female Provision shop owner, Eke Okigwe market; 16. 56 years old male, Indigene of Plateau state, House painter/Artist, Owerri road Okigwe;17. 32 years old, Indigene of Plateau state, Okada rider, Eke okigwe market; 18. 40 years old, Indigene of Abia state, okada rider, Eke okigwe market; 19. 34 years old male, Indigene of Imo state, Okada rider, Eke Okigwe market.

Informed oral consent was obtained with the promise of confidentiality and anonymity and as such, all the names used in this study are pseudonyms. This paper employed the concept of social exclusion to explore the expressions of inequality as observed and experienced by workers in the informal sector using in-depth and key informant interviews as methods of data collection. We continued to collect data until the point of saturation. For the validation and transferability of qualitative data in terms of ascertaining the limit of the quantity and quality of the interviews held, the principle of saturation was employed as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000); Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003, 2009) and Baker and Edwards, (2012). Saturation describes the point in qualitative data collection when the researcher has heard enough of the range of ideas and is experiencing repetition of the same issues with little or no new information emerging (Baker & Edwards, 2012). At this saturation point, the conduct of more interviews was discontinued. After data collection, data was translated, transliterated (as many of the study participants responded in local languages and pidgin), and transcribed. Thereafter, this was imported into Nvivo 12 which was used to process the data leading to extraction of relevant parent (major) and daughter (minor/sub) themes. This also enabled iterative reading and thematic analysis based on the specific objectives of the study and writing up.

## Findings

*Informal Workers and Routine Activities Before COVID-19* Findings reveal that the bulk of informal sector workers in the studied selected areas in Southeastern Nigeria are essentially traders, artisans, and service providers. Small scale traders include food vendors, convenience shop owners, firewood sellers, street hawkers, etc. Artisans include carpenters, electronic devices repairers, saloon operators, roadside motorcycle mechanics, vulcanizers, aluminum fabricators, and welders, while service providers include commercial motorcycle operators, laundrymen, and others whose household survival depends on daily earnings and impulses of Nigeria economy.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, workers in the informal sector in the studied areas relied on daily income. Often time, their job routine was to leave their homes in the early hours of the day in pursuit of daily incomes and return in the evenings from various economic endeavours which include: commercial motorcycle operation, artisan and small-scale trading on perishable and non-perishable food items.

instance, a study participant explained that his job routine commences in the morning at his carpentry workshop and ends at 6 pm. However, with the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was difficult to feed family and domestic dependents. In his words,

I am a daily income earner and couldn't feed my children and apprentices anymore because we were not allowed to go to my shop. I am passing through difficult times; my daughter had an accident that broke her leg and it was a serious setback for us... I do not have any other means of getting money because there were restrictions on our movements due to the need to adhere to the guidelines on social and physical distancing (male, 47, carpenter, Okigwe).

A street food vendor had this to say:

I sell beans and plantain daily but with the COVID-19 outbreak, I couldn't go out anymore because all my prospective customers are indoors and the way the police arrest people, when they come out, has affected my business because people rarely come out as they don't want to be arrested by the police (Female food vendor, 23 years Okigwe).

It is glaring from the responses above that the absence of people on the streets means there is no need to prepare goods or food for sale. In this case, being a daily earner implies that there may be nothing to survive on for the day or the entire period of the lockdown. These narratives show how the pandemic has affected the activities of informal workers and these are replicated by all the study participants as the realities in most informal workers' households.

*Impact of COVID-19 Lockdowns on Informal Workers* The government's non-inclusive 'palliative programs' failed to reach quite a lot of people especially daily income-earning informal traders and workers and its negative impact of starvation/hunger was compounded by restrictive orders on movements and interstate travels which limited the earning capacity of most informal workers. The restricted movement depleted informal economies such that new goods could not be bought as they could not go to markets to buy more goods, depletion of savings and meager capital by household dependents, among others. The study also found that there were increased arrests, bribery, and extortion of motorists by members of the recently disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and by some corrupt Nigerian police officers. This was because many of these informal workers were forced out of their homes by hunger. They had to flout the lockdown order to get food for their families. According to a participant, "the way the police are arresting people when they come out has affected my business because people rarely come out as they don't want to be arrested by the police and I and my family may starve if I fail to make sales" (female, 23years, beans and plantain seller, at Okigwe). Another study participant corroborated that, "during this lockdown period, things were very expensive, transportation fare was on a high rate" (female, 37, hairstylist and artisanal producer of detergents at Okigwe). A study participant corroborated that,

Foodstuffs are very expensive this period even 'paint (bucket) of garri' (processed cassava-a staple food) they previously sold for 500 naira is now Page | 61

1000 naira. The police officers were even not helping matter the way they were arresting people. Carrying out their normal business that provides daily bread for us was not feasible, so this COVID has seriously affected us" (Female, 34, businesswoman, Okigwe).

From the above excerpts, it is glaring that the lockdown had a severe negative effect on informal traders and service providers such as laundrymen and commercial motorcycle operators. A laundryman narrated that "some of the government establishments and banks are on lockdown and these are the places we go to pick up clothes from our customers" (Male, 33, laundry operator). Another study participant narrated how the lockdown affected her business by stating that the COVID-19 pandemic harms clients' patronage. She narrated that: "my main customers are Abia State University students but since school is on lockdown, we no longer get their patronage...even teachers, office ladies, those doing their traditional marriage no longer patronize us ..." (Female, 38, hair stylist) as a result of the ban on the social gatherings.

*Expressions of Inequality by the Informal Workers* Some expressions captured from in-depth interviews show a sense of deprivations, marginalization, and general inequality: "we had to adopt the culture of poverty in the lockdown; not enough food to feed all my family members three square meals; lockdown felt like compulsory hunger strike". According to Lewis (1998; 1963) observed that although the burdens of poverty were systemic and imposed upon members of society, it leads the deprived to form a subculture as young ones are socialized into behaviors and attitudes that perpetuated their inability to escape the lower class. The culture of poverty is a concept in social theory that argues that the values of people experiencing poverty play an important role in elongating their impoverished condition, sustaining a cycle of poverty across generations (Lewis, 1963). In this case, the need to adopt the subculture of 'skipping food' was indirectly imposed by the system and informal workers must do what they can do to survive. It is glaring that people in the culture of poverty have a strong feeling of helplessness, marginality, dependency, of not belonging (non-inclusiveness). They are like strangers in their own country and are convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs. Along with this feeling of powerlessness is a widespread feeling of inferiority, of personal unworthiness, which are not only expressed but sometimes acted out. Early scholars of the theory argued that the poor are not only lacking resources but also acquire a poverty-elongating value system and as such the cycle continues.

Another study participant said "We are surviving by the grace of God", -this expression reflects a resort to the supernatural for survival and this is often prevalent in low-income communities, squatter settlements, and shacks where there are little or no social services. Then, religion becomes the opium of the masses in times of economic crunches. Another expression common in the data collected is "on our own we have been hustling to make ends meet. That is how we have been surviving" - the concept of 'hustling' here implies struggling to ache out a living during socio-economic difficulties and it is commonly used to express suffering, pain, and difficulty in gaining access to basic utilities and resources. Others are 'lockdown feels like imprisonment as we are prevented to go look for how to survive' this government hates the poor and don't care if survive', I heard some people including churches made donations but the government has not shared the palliatives and it may not get to us'. The statement, 'it



may not get to us' already suggest non-inclusiveness or exclusion as a common reality of these class of people.

Some informal workers admit that restrictions on socio-economic activities harmed purchasing powers as well, and this has adversely affected access to procure food and basic medical supplies for their families. A study participant posited that "because of low patronage from my customers, I can't properly feed my family and it is affecting me" (Male, 42, Motor-spare Parts dealer, at Awka). Another study participant explained that the pandemic has limited the source of domestic sustenance and placed tremendous pressure on one partner alone, she explained that, "unlike before, when the children come back from school, I will give them something to eat because I have made some sales and money is with me but now, they have to wait for their father to come back before they eat" (Female, 40, firewood seller, Awka). Reduced daily income-earning was expressed by a study participant who averred that, "since today, it is 200 naira only that came into my hands and I and my siblings will manage it" (Female, 32, a hairstylist at Okigwe).

Furthermore, it was found that government restrictive orders through the instrumentality of law enforcement agencies resulted in extortions, as law enforcement agents, especially police officers capitalized on the enforcement of lockdown to arrest and extort money from citizens, especially road users who ply inter-state routes. The demand for a bribe, especially from interstate drivers resonates with an increment in transportation fare. This increment is passed on to the cost of goods, especially food items. In the face of diminished income and high food process, inequality is entrenched as families' struggles for affordable foodstuffs. Moreover, the extortions and bribes for passage given to law enforcement officers defeat the essence of inter-state restrictive movements adopted by the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and other regulatory agencies to minimize the rate of COVID-19 transmission across inter-state borders and between Southeastern Nigeria and other geopolitical zones in Nigeria.

*Survival Strategies of Informal Workers during the COVID-19 Lockdowns* To cushion the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, informal workers devised alternative survival strategies which include: postponement of feeding in time and space, religious supplications, compulsory hunger strikes, fasting, and subsistence agriculture. Many study participants relied on religious supplications that God will put an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. Others chose to skip food especially lunch to ensure that the available food for the household lasted longer than estimated as expressed by this study participant:

It was a hell-like experience for my family during the compulsory lockdown in my state, we have little food in stock and our church gave us some foods but it was nothing compared to the demands of everyone at home because we had more mouths to feed since everyone is at home 24/7 (24hours in a week); so, I agreed with my husband that all of us have to forego afternoon food daily to cope (Female, fruit seller, at Awka).

Similarly, it was observed that the adoption of subsistence farming as a survival strategy among informal households provided cushioning for the sharp increase in food prices during the COVID-19 lockdown. In the words of a study participant, "...for some time now, I have switched to 'labourer work' (menial jobs) and farming. My wife as well is trying her best from her end" (Male, 32, aluminum fabricator, at Okigwe). Another affirmed that "I entered into cultivating small gardens behind our

survive” (Female, 34, hairstylist, at Awka). Statements such as, “...we are living by the grace of God and “we are praying to God for His intervention” (Female, 35, sales of daily consumables, at Okigwe) showed the despair and uncertainties faced by low-income informal workers who adopted spiritual proclivity such as prayers, believing that these activities would bring an end or ameliorate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic. Citizens’ confidence in God does not translate to confidence in Nigeria’s political leadership. This is not unfounded especially with the unfolding revelations of the ‘endSARS’ protest across various states in Nigeria as pointed by this study participant:

We thank God for the aftermath of the ‘endSARS’ protest shootings which triggered people into looting warehouses which led to the discovery of all the hoarded COVID-19 palliatives stored for the poor masses. Who knew that our various state governments could hide food meant for the poor? I have never trusted our government and these ‘endSARS’ protests have confirmed my apprehensions (Auto mechanic, 33years old at Awka).

This is evidenced in assertions by informal workers who believe that the mass media highlights on growing numbers of COVID-19 infections in Nigeria are concocted schemes by political leaders and government health officials to embezzle public funds. In the words of a study participant, “I don’t believe that coronavirus exists... I think the government just brought it up to embezzle money” (male, 29, artist, and painter, at Okigwe). The lack of public confidence in Nigeria’s governance institution negates adherence to social distancing, regular hand washing, and other COVID-19 preventive measures, thereby perpetuating community transmission.

### **Discussion**

This paper has so far shown the impact of the coronavirus 2019 pandemic on informal economies such as depletion of savings and meager capital for trading by household dependents, inability to restock as new goods could not be bought because they could not go to markets to buy more goods, low patronage for those in the informal service sector like laundrymen, vulcanizers, among others. The expressions of inequality which reflected a sense of deprivation, powerlessness, lack of trust in the government, and the disbelief on the existence of COVID-19 in Nigeria. One common feature muted by many of the study participants is that ‘everyone’s crowd is at home’ and this speaks of the nature of settlements occupied by informal workers which are that of spatial congestions, absence of basic resources like pipe-borne water enabling transmission from person-to-person (Corburn et al., 2020; Nwaka, 2005). Also, the strategies employed in coping with the challenges resulting from lockdowns in Southeastern Nigeria have been shown. Self-help measures were the main coping strategies during the COVID-19 lockdown among informal workers in Southeastern Nigeria in the absence of palliatives from the government. Some scholars have highlighted the role of mass gathering in COVID-19 (Shahul & Ziad, 2020) but this is not the case in the Nigerian situation, the main challenge was that of mitigation of the impact of Covid 19 and not that of containment because the rate of infection was surprisingly low in Sub-Saharan Africa apart from South Africa.

For centuries, global pandemics have intermittently occurred across time and space causing widespread diseases, deaths, and disruptions of socioeconomic activities and survival. Saunders-Hastings & Krewski, (2016) has argued that past Page 164

pandemics is in part a consequence of human development. We have argued that the mitigation of the impact of pandemics remains the main challenge in the developing world rather than the containment. Also, we argue that the emergence and patterns of transmission of pandemics are perpetuated by years of socioeconomic imbalance and dysfunctional political-economic structures. Initially, the COVID-19 pandemic transmission pattern was from international migration following its introduction by index cases, from elites to the common man/lower class, and a subsequent widespread local transmission. However, local transmission in Nigeria is perpetuated not just by migration but by existing non-inclusive socioeconomic structures. We agree with (Barreto, 2020, p. 4096) that “governments with effective coordinated political action and accumulated scientific knowledge, appear to have had greater success in containing the epidemic” but we stress that those with poor socioeconomic structures to ensure inclusive social strata and socioeconomic empowerment of all may find it difficult to contain the transmission and impact of pandemics and they stand the risks of social unrest just like Nigeria. The increasing expressions of deprivation of the lower-class citizenry by Nigeria’s government at various strata piqued on 20 October 2020. This was occasioned by the *endSARS* protest by a cross-section of the Nigerian youth greeted with killings from the shootings by the Nigerian army which attracted international and local condemnation. The most befuddling of these unrests is the nationwide looting of public and private warehouses by those who had perceived themselves deprived of the COVID-19 palliatives mainly the low-income earners and informal workers. The key issues here are self-perceptions of one’s status on socioeconomic ladder and the interpretative meanings given to such status could trigger the feelings of marginalization leading to unrests.

Unfortunately, the Nigerian government’s inability to provide economic support for the teeming low-income household reflects the long-running absence of a social welfare system. In the face of restrictions on movement which limits earning capacity and threatens the livelihood of low-income informal sector workers and lack of access to daily income-generating activities, it is important to explore how it played out among them. This is predicated on the fact that the impact of COVID-19 is assumed to be most devastating on informal sector workers and their families, due to huge domestic responsibilities resulting from an increase in the cost of living caused by the scarcity of food supply networks due to limited movement on the transportation of goods, increase in food prices and daily goods. Poverty, occasioned by lack of daily income may deprive informal workers and their households of purchasing none pharmaceuticals such as hand sanitizers, access to clean water, and other responses required for the prevention of COVID-19. Obiakor (2020) established the nexus between the informal economy and poverty when she noted that the lack of precautionary savings weighs in on family consumption. Informal workers depend on daily income, daily income patterns do not conduce for adequate savings, inadequate savings deprives informal workers of making bulk purchases of food and domestic essentials and this condition increases desperation and the likelihood of social vices. This may even trigger the low-income workers to flout the COVID-19 guidelines in a bid to survive. Considering these issues, this paper has explored the downsides of COVID-19, with emphasis on the implications of governments’ non-inclusive response and interventions for all especially informal traders/workers among selected communities in Southeastern Nigeria.

## Conclusion

In sum, we have been able to explore the nature of the impact, common expressions of inequality, and the coping strategies during the COVID-19 lockdowns among the informal workers in the two states of Southeastern Nigeria studied. It is observed that with non-inclusive socioeconomic structures in Nigeria, it is difficult to actualize 100% compliance to guidelines from World Health Organization on COVID-19 and National Centre for Disease Control, especially from socioeconomically deprived populations during epidemics and pandemic due to existing structures of deprivations. Structural deprivations become very glaring during pandemics and keep the informal workers more powerless leaving them at the mercy of the whims of politicians and political decisions. The challenge in Nigeria during the COVID-19 lockdown was mainly that of mitigation of the socioeconomic impact of the coronavirus pandemic particularly on the most vulnerable and not entirely that of containment because the rate of transmission in Nigeria compared to other parts of the world is low. The paper concludes that inequality elicits strong expressions of marginalization, and deprivation among informal workers which is heightened in the face of a pandemic, and the culture of poverty is employed as a coping strategy.

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