

Economic Reforms and Sustainable Development: Interrogating Nigeria's Experience with Tough Love Theory

Samuel Sunday Idowu, PhD

Caleb University, Imota, Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

Nigeria's development journey is characterised by numerous economic reforms aimed at catalysing citizens' welfare and development since its independence in 1960. Regimes, military and civilian, have adopted diverse christened economic reforms such as development plans, Operation Feed the Nation, SAP, NEEDS, and ERGP. The overarching question of whether these policies achieve the intended welfare of citizens and enshrine sustainable economic development remains paramount to achieving SDG 8. This sets the objective for this study. The research adopted a qualitative analytical design and employed secondary data sources from credible online and offline to interrogate Nigeria's experience. It found that the series of economic reforms undertaken was abysmally low, made sustainable economic development difficult, inflicted pains on Nigerians and betrayed their promised expectations. Hence, the repeated regime's disappointment qualified the parenting tough love approach to theory in application to the government-citizen relationship. The study canvass, amongst others, suggests that the government should be selective of the policy to adopt.

Key Words: economic reforms, Nigeria, sustainable development, tough love theory

Introduction

Good governance is a widely used yardstick for assessing governments' performance around the world today. It includes four categories - economy, development, governance and industry - with attached variables such as ease of doing business, financial development index, globalization index for economy box, global competitiveness, global innovation for economy and human development index global multi-dimensional poverty index, global gender gap, global inequality gap index, global hunger index for development category (NCCG, 2021). However, the basis for good governance assessment is to ascertain the priority of a government on human or citizens' welfare or the premium placed on their quality of life. Moreover, the kernel of citizens' welfare is their security and economic well-being, which are the primary concerns of a responsive and responsible government. As

well, in meeting the economic dimension, the government distil diverse policies with the intent of engendering development at the same time. Hence, the economic reforms and development are intertwined, simultaneous equations linked and consequential. But government intention, sometimes in developing countries, receives backlash and is met with resentment, especially when the policy aftermath is attended with adverse effects. As such, the government's well-intentioned policies for national development are perceived as ill-intentioned by the populace, creating contrasting perspectives.

Nigeria's development journey is characterised by numerous economic reforms aimed at catalysing the development process since its independence in 1960. (Idowu, 2020). While the colonial administration bequeathed liberal and capitalist-oriented political and economic

systems, the independent regimes have somewhat sustained the trajectory with little but insignificant alteration. For instance, the mixed-economy system, whereby the government plays the active role of a participant in the productive sector by investing in public enterprises (PEs) such as the Nigeria Telecommunication Company, the Nigeria Port Authority (NPA), the Nigeria Airways, amongst others, is an indication of toeing the path of Keynesian classical liberal economic belief. Though Arowolo and Ologunowa (2012) posit that government participation in an economy is a means for promoting citizens' welfare, the poor performance of the PEs seems to be defeating the welfare intention, resulting in the privatisation of many raises great concerns about the efficacy of government investment. In this sense, the decision of the government to abandon the subsidised production and services, social equity and government-led socio-economic development regime for the private sector-engineered route with its attendant high cost of living for the masses is believed to be necessary or an indispensable. For instance, the government's privatisation of the electricity power sector in 2015 signals a shift in economic orientation from the public sector economic stimulation to the private sector (Idowu 'et al', 2020). This implies that public sector management of public utilities is characterised by underperformance. Hence, the big questions needing to be answered are: Is citizens' welfare still paramount in the private sector-dominated economy, and how is the government promoting citizens' sustainable welfare and development to attain Sustainable Development Goal 8 of decent work and economic growth?

Seeking an empirical answer to this germane question necessitates this study and constitutes its objectives as well. The research employs an analytical design to answer the question, leveraging secondary data sources. The study is divided into five sections. Following this introduction section are Nigeria's economic reform programmes literature review, tough-love theory development, economic reforms and tough-love theory interrogation with Nigeria's experience

and conclusion and recommendations respectively.

Nigeria Economic Reforms Programmes

The primacy of economic development to national development is too strategic to be undermined, making the national government strive relentlessly for its stability and ascendancy. Nigeria, as a developing state, has made efforts to transform its economic base from an agricultural-based to an industrialised economy since the early days of independence. The country's natural endowment has made agriculture its primary sector and economic driver since the pre-independent era. For instance, Nwankpa (2017) maintains that the huge population, approximately 220 million; 98.3 million hectares of arable land, accounting for 72.4% of land in West Africa; and 12 million hectares of freshwater cover the land, and ecological diversity position Nigeria as an agro-based territory. This undoubtedly stimulates residents to engage actively in farming, though characterised by small-holders and crude implements, resulting in underutilisation of both human and natural resources. Meanwhile, the developed states are already coasting on the industrial development highway, leaving the country, and even the continent and its contemporary, behind the curve of the 20th century. Nonetheless, the lag appears as a vacuum that should be closed but seems unattended.

Given the above deficits, the journey to catch up with the global economic driver becomes obvious, necessitating economic reforms. The first national development rolling plan, intended to initiate economic reform, was introduced in 1960 and was scheduled to run through 1968 (Idowu, 2020). It kick-started the industrialisation drive, with the manufacturing sector serving as the launchpad for economic diversification from the agricultural-dominated economy. Additionally, the authour further states that the development plans of 1970-1974, 1975-1980 and 1981-1985 were geared to consolidate the first, except that of 1970-1974, which primarily aimed to rehabilitate the civil war-torn areas

in the eastern part of the nation. However, some factors vitiate the plan's performance to transform the economy. Olorunfemi 'et al' (2013) submit that the weak technological base makes the country overdependent on foreign sources. Also, the booming oil sector revenue that should have been leveraged for diversification funding serves a distracting purpose, as the government's steady income fuels a luxurious lifestyle and corruption of political leaders and bureaucrats. This seemingly ugly experience widens the development gap between Nigeria and the industrialised economy, aside from the political imbroglio that also characterised this period during President Shagari's civilian rule between 1979 and 1983. Shagari's agricultural green revolution policy did not transform the sector largely due to poor implementation and political crisis. The precarious situation attracted global attention, requiring international agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, to solicit assistance for economic development. Can these economic management lapses and IMF remedial assistance indicate the government's pursuit of the populace's good? It is doubtful.

Furthermore, the structural adjustment programme (SAP) was another economic reform measure adopted by the Nigerian government in 1986, which was rampant among African countries and embraced, either out of their initiative or via the assistance of the World Bank or IMF for economic stabilisation, improved macro-economic management, entrenching good governance and dependence of the economy on crude oil revenue (Nelson, 2025). In sum, the measure is to revitalise, stabilise, and reposition the ailing economy through the privatisation and commercialisation of public enterprises and the promotion of non-oil exports, especially manufactured goods. It is noteworthy that it is a consensus among scholars that the SAP outcome aggravates the masses' economic misfortune with an insignificant impact on the economic advancement in Nigeria. It appears as a western-oriented development strategy unfitting for a developing economy like Nigeria, confronted

with complex socio-economic and political contradictions. Implicitly, the SAP rescue mission was roundly defeated as citizens were left worse off.

At the dawn of the millennium and the beginning of the 21st century, a democratic government was installed to mark the end of protracted military regimes. This was greeted with high expectations of good governance and economic prosperity by the nationals and the international community. President Olusegun Obasanjo, in 2004-2007, introduced the National Economic and Development Strategy (NEEDS) policy as a restructuring mechanism to tackle poverty, generate employment, create wealth, grow the private sector and reform government institutions (Max and Aduma, 2016). Similarly, the Yaradua/Jonathan regime developed a transformation agenda and economic restructuring policy (a modified version of president Yaradua's seven-point agenda aimed to restructure governance and economy in 2007 who died in 2011 and was succeeded by Jonathan his Vice) with the thrust to transform the economy by reducing poverty, diversify the economy and unite the country for collective development (Akande, 2022). As well, Buhari's civilian regime initiated an economic recovery and growth plan (ERGP) to redress the economic recession pain, effect structural change, and improve social viability and environmental sustainability, making it compliant with the sustainable development goals (Anam 'et al', 2024). However, these policies seem bereft of positive narratives or testimonies in media or literature.

Gleanable from these economic reform policies is the common denominator of triggering socio-economic development through the private sector. While the policy names vary across regimes, the performance lacuna of succeeding policy implementation gave birth to new ones with identical objectives. Though it may be early to assess the current president, Tinubu's 8-point renewed hope agenda for economic development, just approximately two and a half years in office, but going by the objectives of job creation, poverty reduction and

foreign capital injection, it is not out of place to argue that they are akin to preceding policies and measures. Nigeria's economic reform policies seem to be a reflection of enduring economic challenges that appear to resist well-intentioned but poorly executed imported policies. As such, the gravity of their impact on the end recipients' citizenry after many years of promissory notes and hope campaign makes one question political leaders' grasp of these policies and their application to Nigeria's context and milieu.

Tough Love Theory Adaptation

Tough love is a concept that describes a parenting approach used to manage deviant children. It was first employed in the literature by York and York's book in 1980 to describe the strategy of the parent-children relationship that involves rebellious children, how parents are to rise to tame erring wards through tough communication with love, and ensuring that the recipient's perception of the intention is for their benefit (Severance, 2019). Similarly, the concept is adapted to analyse leadership and subordinate relationships, whereby the former prompts the latter to improve performance by setting boundaries, rules, and strict measures to achieve organisational goals (Cadwell and Anderson, 2023). It is discernible that tough love is not a theory but an approach or an analytical tool for bringing about transformative results in either a character defect of a child by parents or subordinates by a leader. But the challenges of rightly applying the key principles of honesty, caring, clarity, long-term focus, virtuousness, realistic perspective, responsible actions and respectfulness by leaders in executing tough love (Cadwell and Anderson, 2023) imbue it with multi-disciplinary application and theoretical capacity, as most theories are anchored on principle-based assumptions.

Hence, the researcher posits that tough love is a veritable tool for analysing macro or state-level leadership-citizens' relationship through policy decisions. As such, the intention of policymakers (government) and the perception of recipients (masses) about the policy are eviscerated to

ascertain the impact. The tough love approach, in the context of this research, is propounded as government economic policies designed (or with the intention) to transform the lives of the citizenry for the better or aggrandise their well-being, albeit it often causes them pain in the short run. Implicitly, Nigeria's economic reforms are coined and dispense to inject positive outcomes into the society irrespective of the regime; but, the perception of the citizens about the intention and outcome of these policies as tough love that adheres to its principles of honesty, virtuousness, realistic perspectives, responsible actions, amongst others, is the other side, eliciting and underscoring the correlate. This is plausible and informs the elevation of tough love from an approach to theory, an analytical tool and assumption for explaining economic reform relations between the government and citizens. Moreover, interrogating the two sides of a coin is undertaken in the next section.

Economic Reforms and Tough Love Theory in Nigeria

Expectedly, economic reforms are to drive national sustainable development, making exceptional cases worrisome. Hence, examining Nigeria's experience will attest to or disaffirm this norm. Economic diversification from agriculture to an industrialised economy was the leading goal of the first and second development plans, with import substitution industries (ISI) as the target of the latter. Similarly, SAP incorporates industrial growth as a medium for economic diversification. While these measures highlight and underscore economic liberal and, by extension, neoliberalism theories that advocate for individual, private and minimum government interference in the productive side of the economy, the populace's benefit bottom line objective is vitiated by poor management. Moreover, the lacuna between the theory and praxis predicated on implementation assessment by scholars casts doubt on realising the set goals. First, Udejaja, et al' (2021) submit that the funding gap of these policies by the government weakens the implementation; second, Effiong (2022) maintains that the poor implementation

of policies resulted in fluctuating results with, approximately, 28 percent contribution to the GDP in 2020; and, Idowu (2020) argues that insecurity and poor political governance impede the yielding of the industrial economic diversification plan dividends.

Meanwhile, the agricultural sectoral development that was supposed to complement the industrial sector growth was not rejigged for that purpose after the discovery of crude oil, which largely funded the national budget from 1960 (Effiong, 2022). This reveals a poorly coordinated plan for development by the government despite articulated policies. Likewise, it depicts that the agricultural sector was abandoned and excused from the development equation upon which food security is anchored, which is the bedrock of other sectoral survival.

The second republic operation feed the nation of the Shagari regime existed only in name as no notable impact was traceable to its implementation. It is worth noting that Nigeria's economic foundational sector has been relegated to secondary status. And, attempt to relaunch it in the fourth republic, according to Ugwukah (2022), has yielded a marginally significant contribution of 29 per cent to the GDP as of 2020 from a decline of 7 per cent in the 1980s. In other words, the Fourth Republic government's efforts to revamp the sector are commendable, though still far from the 75 per cent pre-independent GDP and 70 per cent employment contributions to the economy, and indicate abandonment of rural communities, lack of or insufficient employment of a modern scientific production system and technology. In effect, the agricultural sector reforms have not positively trickled down to the rural masses that constitute a chunk of the country's population.

The democratic regimes of the 21st century of Obasanjo, Jonathan and Buhari have common policy objectives of poverty reduction, economic diversification, reduction of unemployment, and increase in the foreign direct investment inflow under different programmes. While President Obasanjo's NEEDS policy was aimed at trans-

mogrifying the economy and public sector management to improve Nigerians' fortune, its poor performance was summed up thus: "...the reform package did not provide any pro-active incentive structures that would have empowered the human elements in the system" (Eze & Nnedum, 2013, p 42). It suggests that the people-oriented impacts underlying the essence of the reform were minimal.

Similarly, the Jonathan government transformation agenda outputs is argued not to achieve economic diversification, or reduce poverty despite rebasing the GDP to include the communication sector, but rather had little impact on ordinary Nigerians with rising poverty of over 110 million living on less than a dollar per day (Adedokun, 2015). Buhari's ERGP performance outlook is akin to that of his predecessors. The economy experienced recession twice, high inflation, low economic growth and a high debt profile of 77 trillion from 44 trillion before leaving office in 2023 (BudgIT, 2023). This depicts a gloomy experience for Nigerians despite riding to power on the wings of promising to fight corruption, tame insecurity, and reform the economy like others before him.

Deductible from the above analysis is the fact that the promises of improved citizens' well-being and sustainable economic development as the bases for introducing economic reforms by the government since independence have hardly been achieved despite laudable and hyped promises of positive expectations. The effects are often multiple harrowing experiences of increased inflation, poverty, unemployment, underemployment, poor infrastructures such as roads, provision of portable water, recreational facilities, power supply and inadequate funding of the education sector. In this regard, the plausibility of economic liberalism and neoliberalist theories' adoption for sustainable economic development in Nigeria contrasts with their assumptions as advocated by their progenitors, especially Adam Smith and his ilk, and the testimonials of some Western countries. Therefore, the pertinent question is: are economic reforms meant to address citizens' welfare with the

negative effects accompanying the outcome? If the answer is yes, one can posit that the Nigerian governments have betrayed their intention by failing the good governance test, and the misconception and misapplication of liberal economic policies, resulting in underperformance or lessened relevance of the liberal and neoliberal theories. Put differently, since the economic reforms deliverables eluded the Nigerian masses, it is plausible to submit that it is a tough love policy that failed its principles of honesty, caring, clarity, long-term focus, virtuousness, realistic perspective, responsible actions and respectfulness. Consequently, the excruciating pains accompanying the series of agricultural, industrial, economic and other ancillary reforms implementations experienced by Nigerians typify a tough love theory loss of its essence or effect. As a corollary, sustainable economic development becomes a fleeting or miragelike feat, threatening the attainment of SDG 8 with spillover effects on SDG 1, (no poverty) and SDG 2 (zero hunger) achievement as well.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria's economic reforms from independence have been characterised by underperformance, inflicting unpleasant experiences on the masses and making developmental impact insignificant despite ambitious promises at their conception by political leaders. This makes these reforms akin to the tough love parenting approach (good, well-intended programmes) that betrayed their purposes - Nigerians' improved living and sustainable economic development. Additionally, the recurrence of this experience in Nigeria elevates and qualifies tough love, as argued, as a theory that has been tested and validated by both the civilians and military regimes from 1960 to 2023, the Buhari civilian government.

Therefore, while the current president Ahmed Tinubu's government reforms are presented as a necessary and unavoidable path to sustainable economic development under his renewed hope agenda, especially that of oil subsidy reforms removal, and floating of the currency exchange

rate to allow market forces to determine its value, the accompanying rise of cost living is making Nigerians sceptical and leery the regime genuine intention. Judging from their experiences, Nigerians' disbelief is not only legitimate but valid. In this regard, the following recommendations are canvassed to prevent the repeat of the betrayal of the tough love theory.

First, the Nigerian government needs to be selective and filter economic reform policies to adopt, irrespective of the credibility or status of the advocates, internal or external. This is paramount because not all policies are suitable for her level of economic development and other internal peculiarities.

Second, economic reform policies should be subjected to public and legislative assemblies' debate to give room for cross-fertilisation of perspectives, ideas and gauging of citizens' acceptability via opinions or suggestions. The outcome of these reactions should decision to adopt the policy predicated. This would strengthen the policy conception, implementation, acceptability, and accountability and also minimise the overriding influence or imposition of political leaders' idiosyncrasies or personal interest aggrandisement.

Third, human welfare package windows, such as in the form of palliatives, should be incorporated in economic reform policy implementation in Nigeria to cushion the detrimental effects on average Nigerians in the short run. This is important because of the current high level of poverty.

Lastly, political regimes should be made to answer or account for decisions and expenditure of public resources after leaving office, as is the case in many saner climes like Europe and America. Though the immunity clause in the 1999 constitution (as amended) may prevent the executives from being answerable to court proceedings while in office, the enactment of a law for post-tenure prosecution for abuse of office by any citizen with evidence would make them more careful and rational in their decision-making and conduct while in office.

Conflict of Interest

I wish to state that this is a single-author publication; there is no conflict of interest.

AI Declaration

Grammarly was used for some grammatical corrections.

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