

FUEL SUBSIDY REMOVAL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON FOOD INSECURITY, HOUSEHOLD POVERTY, AND STANDARD OF LIVING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria has had significant implications for food insecurity and the standard of living, leading to increased poverty levels among households across the country. This policy shift, which came with the inauguration of the current government, has left many families struggling to afford basic necessities, including food, shelter, and healthcare. As a result, many households are facing dire conditions, unable to meet the minimum requirements for a decent life. This paper examines the adverse effects of fuel subsidy removal on food insecurity and the standard of living, highlighting its role in deepening household poverty. Through an exploratory approach and qualitative analysis, the paper discusses how rising commodity prices, reduced disposable income, and limited access to essential goods have aggravated hunger and economic instability. The paper argues that the removal of subsidies has worsened food insecurity, especially for low-income families. The paper also proposes that the government must address the broader social consequences of the subsidy removal by improving communication with the public and developing policies to cushion the impact on the most vulnerable sectors of society.

Keywords: Food insecurity, standard of living, fuel subsidy removal, household poverty

Introduction

The removal of the fuel subsidy in Nigeria, announced by President Bola Tinubu on May 29, 2023, has had far-reaching implications for the standard of living of ordinary Nigerians. Since that announcement, life has significantly changed for many citizens, with escalating prices of goods and services across various sectors of the economy. This policy shift has triggered economic consequences that have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable segments of the population, particularly in a country where oil revenues have long been central to economic stability and government finances. The Nigerian economy's heavy dependence on oil exports has exacerbated the negative effects of this sudden change, leading to challenges for citizens struggling to meet their basic needs. Fuel subsidy removal refers to the government's decision to eliminate or reduce financial assistance on a product, which previously kept its price artificially low (Ogwuche et al., 2024). Fuel subsidy, specifically, is a discount provided by the government on the price of fossil fuels, enabling consumers to pay less than the market price (Ovaga & Okechukwu, 2022). This support can take the form of direct or indirect payments made by the government, intended to alleviate the cost burden of products on citizens. Direct subsidies often involve cash payments or transfers, while indirect subsidies may include government policies such as tax exemptions that benefit industries or

households (Ogwuche et al., 2024). In Nigeria's case, the government has traditionally compensated oil suppliers or retailers to cover the difference between the actual cost of fuel production and the reduced price paid by consumers. Fuel subsidies were first introduced in Nigeria in the 1970s in response to the oil price shock of 1973 (Ozili & Obiora, 2023). Since then, subsidies have been periodically adjusted, with notable removals occurring in 1986 and again in 2012. However, each time subsidies were removed, mass protests erupted, forcing the government to reinstate them. By 2022, the cost of fuel subsidies had ballooned to ₦4 trillion (US\$6.088 billion), representing 23% of Nigeria's national budget (₦17.126 trillion). Due to unsustainable fiscal pressures, the Nigerian government announced the complete removal of fuel subsidies in 2023, initiating a significant policy shift that would impact households nationwide.

Fuel prices, particularly the price of petroleum motor spirit (PMS), have long been a central issue in Nigeria, given the country's reliance on oil for economic stability. Aniemeke (2024) noted that Nigerian governments have historically implemented fuel subsidies to keep fuel prices affordable, thereby stimulating economic growth. Subsidies are designed to reduce costs for both consumers and producers, often promoting the consumption and production of goods and services (Kyle, 2018). For instance, direct government payments to farmers can lower production costs, making goods more affordable. Similarly, fuel subsidies aim to ease the burden on citizens, especially those in lower-income brackets, to promote social stability (Ovaga & Okechukwu, 2022). Despite the theoretical benefits of fuel subsidy removal, Nigeria's economic situation remains fragile. The country's economy, long plagued by corruption and mismanagement, is struggling to maintain stability (Onyekakeyah, 2023). While subsidy removal may benefit stable economies, Onyekakeyah (2023) argues that, in Nigeria's case, such a policy could have devastating effects. The expectation that the subsidy removal will free up funds for reinvestment into infrastructure and domestic refining may not materialize as expected, especially given the country's longstanding infrastructural challenges.

Nigeria's private sector is hindered by numerous obstacles, including unreliable power supply, high taxation, and poor infrastructure, all of which prevent meaningful participation in a deregulated economy (Amadi, 2023). Amadi (2023) further argues that no economy can thrive when essential products, like fuel, are deregulated without the necessary infrastructural support to stimulate production and ensure citizens' well-being. Despite Nigeria's four refineries, which have a combined capacity of 445,000 liters of fuel per day, these refineries are underperforming, further exacerbating the country's dependency on imported fuel (Onyambayi et al., 2024). The inelastic demand for fuel in Nigeria means that even minor increases in fuel prices cause widespread disruptions, negatively impacting citizens' daily lives and economic activities. With an estimated 80-90 million Nigerians living in extreme poverty, the removal of fuel subsidies may push many households further into hardship (Amadi, 2023). The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reports that 143 million

Nigerians live in multidimensional poverty, with an unemployment rate of around 33.4% (Amadi, 2023). The country's constitution proclaims Nigeria as a social welfare state, but in practice, the political economy has favored a privileged few, exacerbating inequality and deepening poverty. This economic disparity is not confined to Lagos but is a national issue where the economy primarily benefits the few at the expense of the majority. Umeji and Eleanya (2021) noted that the wealth generated from Nigeria's oil resources has not translated into improved living standards for most Nigerians. They argue that the removal of fuel subsidies could have severe consequences but that these could be mitigated if the government demonstrates transparency in managing the funds saved from subsidy removal, directing them towards infrastructure development that would positively impact the lives of the country's impoverished majority.

Conceptualization

Food insecurity, standard of living, fuel subsidy, and household poverty are interconnected socio-economic issues that significantly influence the well-being of individuals and communities. Each of these concepts plays a crucial role in understanding the challenges faced by households, especially in developing countries where economic conditions are often fragile. This section provides an in-depth analysis of these concepts, drawing from recent authors and studies. Food insecurity refers to the lack of access to enough nutritious, safe, and affordable food to maintain an active and healthy life. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (2022), food insecurity is characterized by the unavailability of sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets dietary needs. Smith et al. (2021) further define it as a condition where individuals or communities are unable to consistently access quality and sufficient food, resulting in adverse health outcomes. Similarly, Jones and Sheff (2023) emphasize that food insecurity extends beyond the mere absence of food, highlighting the importance of affordability and nutritional value, which are often constrained by socio-economic inequalities. For the purpose of this study, food insecurity is operationally defined as the inability of households to regularly access enough nutritious and affordable food, influenced by factors such as economic constraints and rising food prices. This condition is intrinsically linked to household poverty, as individuals in poverty are often unable to afford adequate food, leading to malnutrition and further health complications. The persistent issue of food insecurity also affects the standard of living, as it directly impacts health, productivity, and overall quality of life.

The standard of living refers to the material well-being of individuals or communities, encompassing access to goods, services, and overall quality of life. As Chaudhuri et al. (2022) define it, the standard of living includes the wealth, comfort, and accessibility to essential services that determine the quality of life. Klasen (2023) elaborates that the standard of living is shaped by income, housing, healthcare, education, and other resources necessary to meet basic needs. Moreover, Moser et al. (2021) argue that it is both an objective measure

(income, resources) and a subjective factor (life satisfaction, personal well-being). In this context, the standard of living is operationally defined as the overall access to resources and services that allow households to meet their basic needs. The removal of fuel subsidies can significantly lower the standard of living, especially for lower-income households. As fuel prices rise due to the subsidy removal, transportation and energy costs increase, straining household budgets. This, in turn, leads to heightened food insecurity and deepens household poverty, reducing the overall standard of living.

Fuel subsidies are financial interventions provided by governments to reduce the cost of fuel, thus making energy more affordable for households and businesses. Okunola et al. (2024) explain that fuel subsidies are intended to mitigate the burden on consumers, particularly those in lower-income brackets, by lowering retail prices of fuel. However, Ogunyemi and Yusuff (2023) point out that fuel subsidies, while helpful in the short term, can lead to fiscal imbalances and are unsustainable if not carefully managed. Eze et al. (2023) argue that the removal of these subsidies often results in higher fuel prices, which exacerbates economic inequalities, especially among the poorest populations. In operational terms, fuel subsidies in this study refer to government interventions that reduce fuel prices for consumers. The removal of subsidies often leads to an increase in fuel costs, which directly impacts the cost of living, particularly in terms of transportation and energy use. As fuel prices rise, households face higher costs for basic goods and services, contributing to household poverty and worsening food insecurity.

Household poverty is the condition where individuals or families lack the financial means to meet their basic needs, including food, shelter, healthcare, and education. Hossain et al. (2022) define household poverty as the inability of families to secure adequate resources for daily survival, leading to material deprivation and exclusion. Berg et al. (2023) view poverty as a multidimensional issue that goes beyond income, involving factors such as access to healthcare and education, which are essential for improving one's quality of life. Similarly, Sachs (2022) contends that poverty is a complex condition, not just limited to the lack of financial resources but also reflecting an inability to access opportunities for upward mobility, such as education and employment. For this study, household poverty is operationally defined as a state where families cannot meet essential survival needs due to insufficient financial resources, exacerbated by external economic pressures like fuel price increases. The removal of fuel subsidies intensifies household poverty as rising fuel prices increase the cost of living, making it more difficult for households to afford basic necessities, including food. This, in turn, leads to greater food insecurity and a decline in the standard of living.

These concepts food insecurity, standard of living, fuel subsidy, and household poverty—are deeply interconnected. The removal of fuel subsidies has a cascading effect on food prices, transportation costs, and overall household expenditures. As fuel prices rise, the standard of living declines, particularly for lower-income households. This leads to increased

household poverty, as families are unable to meet their basic needs. Consequently, food insecurity intensifies, as higher fuel prices make it more expensive to transport food and essential goods, making them less accessible to low-income families. The interrelationship of these concepts underscores the need for holistic policy interventions that consider the broader socio-economic consequences of decisions such as subsidy removal.

Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Standard of Living in Nigeria: Impact of Fuel Subsidy Removal

Poverty, often seen as a sign of economic inequality, is a multifaceted condition that reflects not only an individual's economic status but also the wider societal structure. According to Onyambayi et al. (2024), poverty occurs when an individual's income or consumption level falls below a certain threshold, preventing them from meeting basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare. People trapped in poverty are often confronted with constant hunger, lack of access to quality education and healthcare, and social exclusion. This social condition is defined by the insufficient resources necessary to meet a minimum standard of living as expected in their particular society or community. On a sociological level, Onyambayi et al. (2024) describe poverty as a social phenomenon influenced by structural factors, social institutions, and power dynamics. The role of social stratification, inequality, and social exclusion is pivotal in perpetuating poverty and limiting the opportunities available to marginalized individuals. These dynamics contribute to the cycle of poverty, making it difficult for individuals to escape their situation and improve their socio-economic status.

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity refers to a situation where individuals or communities lack consistent access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for an active and healthy life. The FAO defines food insecurity as the absence of regular access to enough nutritious food to maintain well-being and health. Food insecurity affects billions of people worldwide, robbing them of their fundamental right to healthy food and resulting in dire consequences for individuals, families, and communities. In Nigeria, the fuel subsidy removal has exacerbated food insecurity, pushing many households to struggle with the high costs of basic commodities and leaving less disposable income for essential needs. Food insecurity manifests at varying degrees, with severe cases leading to hunger, malnutrition, and starvation. The Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), as defined by the FAO, classifies food insecurity into several levels based on access to food:

- **Adequate access to food:** Individuals are secure in both quantity and quality of food but may face uncertainty about future access.
- **Moderate food insecurity:** Individuals have to reduce the quality or quantity of their food, and uncertainty about continued access to adequate food exists.
- **Severe food insecurity:** Individuals have run out of food, or have gone without food for a day or more, indicating extreme hunger.

In Nigeria, many individuals are experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity, particularly after the fuel subsidy removal, as the cost of food skyrockets. Those in moderate food insecurity are forced to compromise on the quality or quantity of their food, which can result in a rise in malnutrition, obesity, and other health issues due to reliance on cheaper, unhealthy food options. The stress of uncertain food availability further exacerbates these health challenges.

Standard of Living

The standard of living refers to the level of material well-being, comfort, and access to goods and services available to individuals or groups within a specific geographic area. It is often assessed using economic indicators such as GDP (Gross Domestic Product) or GDP per capita, though the World Bank prefers to measure standard of living through GNI (Gross National Income) per capita. A higher GNI per capita typically indicates a higher standard of living, with better access to goods, services, and opportunities. Standard of living can be significantly influenced by private business investments, which may create jobs and improve access to essential services. For example, the opening of a major corporation like Flourmills in a city can increase job opportunities and enhance living conditions, while the closure of a store like Nestlé can have the opposite effect, lowering the standard of living in that area.

In the context of Nigeria, the removal of the fuel subsidy has triggered a dramatic increase in the cost of living. Prices for transportation, housing, and consumer goods have risen sharply, leading to a marked decline in the standard of living for many Nigerians. Access to basic utilities, such as electricity and indoor plumbing, is also a critical factor when measuring standard of living. Regions with limited access to such utilities experience a lower standard of living compared to those with widespread access. The recent surge in consumer prices, alongside reduced access to essential goods and services, has caused significant hardship for many Nigerians, reinforcing the negative effects of fuel subsidy removal on the overall standard of living. As the cost of living continues to rise, many people are struggling to meet even their most basic needs.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Conflict Theory, as employed by Asomba et al. (2024), to explore the socio-economic consequences of fuel subsidy removal, particularly in relation to food insecurity and the standard of living in Nigeria. Conflict Theory, a framework that emphasizes the continuous power struggles within society due to competition for scarce resources, provides an essential lens through which to understand societal dynamics, particularly issues like poverty, insecurity, and social unrest. The theory suggests that society is in a state of constant conflict, as different groups fight to secure their interests, whether economic, social, or political. It contends that the maintenance of social order is dependent on the power and wealth of dominant groups who suppress and control the less privileged, rather than on consensus and societal conformity. In the context of Nigeria, the tenets of Conflict

Theory are evident in the struggles between the powerful elites and the marginalized, particularly in terms of resource distribution. The theory posits that the powerful will go to great lengths to preserve their dominance, even if it comes at the expense of the broader population. While Nigeria may not be engaged in a full-scale war, the country faces numerous security challenges that reflect the violence and chaos typically associated with armed conflicts. As Dupuy & Rustad (2018) and Guseh & Oritsejafor (2019) pointed out, an armed conflict is typically classified as a civil war when there are over 1,000 battle-related deaths. Nigeria has experienced such violence for decades, with countless lives lost due to various forms of conflict, such as terrorism, communal clashes, kidnapping, and armed robbery.

These conflicts often lead to the displacement of communities, particularly farmers, forcing them to abandon their agricultural activities and seek refuge in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. The disruption of farming and agricultural activities, which are critical to the livelihoods of millions in Nigeria, exacerbates food insecurity and poverty. Conflict Theory highlights that societal progress is severely hindered in an atmosphere of violence and disorder, where the lack of security prevents individuals and communities from realizing their potential. The current Nigerian government's efforts to diversify the economy, particularly through a focus on agriculture following the removal of the fuel subsidy, are undermined by the persistent security challenges. Insecurity caused by armed groups, including kidnappers, terrorists, and armed herdsmen, has made it increasingly difficult for the government to achieve its agricultural goals. Farms and farming communities are frequently targeted, and the lack of adequate response to these security issues prevents any meaningful progress in the sector. It is particularly troubling that, despite the government's claims of prioritizing agricultural development, its response to security threats in these critical areas remains insufficient. The inability to address the security challenges effectively poses a significant barrier to achieving the desired outcomes of economic diversification, and the researcher expresses concern over the government's failure to take decisive action in curbing insecurity. Hence, Conflict Theory offers a compelling explanation for the current socio-political challenges in Nigeria. The theory underscores how the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a few elites, coupled with the ongoing security challenges, perpetuates inequality, disrupts development, and worsens poverty. It also highlights the importance of security and social cohesion for achieving any significant progress, especially in efforts to diversify the economy and tackle food insecurity. The theoretical framework reveals the need for a more robust government response to address the root causes of conflict and insecurity, particularly in agricultural regions, to ensure that the country can move forward and create a more equitable society.

Impact of Fuel Subsidy Removal on Household Well-being in Nigeria

The removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria has triggered a series of economic challenges, particularly affecting households across the country. One of the most significant

consequences of this policy shift has been the escalating food crisis, which reached unprecedented levels even before the subsidy removal. Food inflation has surged, resulting in a sharp increase in the number of food-insecure individuals. In response to this growing crisis, on July 13, 2023, President Bola Tinubu declared a state of emergency on food security. The government's directive included the inclusion of food and water availability within the purview of the National Security Council, with the hope of launching targeted initiatives to mitigate the effects of food scarcity. However, more than a year after this declaration, the expected improvements in food security have not been realized, and the burden on households continues to rise.

Rising Costs and Economic Strain: The removal of fuel subsidies has led to a significant increase in transportation costs, which has, in turn, driven up the cost of essential goods and services. A study by Onyambayi et al. (2024) highlights that the increase in fuel prices has disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations, particularly those in rural areas who rely on affordable transportation for accessing markets and services. This surge in costs has also negatively affected agricultural productivity, as farmers face increased input prices, including fuel for tractors and transportation of goods to markets. Small businesses and other economic activities have also been stifled, leaving many households struggling with financial burdens and escalating poverty. The World Bank (2023) estimates that the removal of the fuel subsidy has pushed more than 7 million Nigerians into deeper poverty, a situation worsened by the lack of sufficient palliative measures to compensate for these losses.

Reduced Disposable Income and Inadequate Access to Essentials: While the fuel subsidy removal was intended to stimulate economic growth and foster stability, its implementation has had unintended negative consequences. Ogboru and Akinyetu (2024) found that the policy has severely impacted family incomes, making it difficult for average Nigerians to sustain their living standards. The sharp rise in the cost of goods and services has led to expenditures far exceeding household incomes. The aim of diversifying the Nigerian economy, particularly through the promotion of agriculture, has been hindered by rising insecurity, including attacks on farms by herders and kidnappers. As noted by Asomba et al. (2024), these security challenges have undermined efforts to increase agricultural productivity, leading to food shortages and higher prices for available food commodities.

Increased Hunger and Poverty: The removal of the subsidy was intended to free up government resources for infrastructure development and economic growth. However, over a year after the policy's implementation, most government projects continue to be financed through borrowing, raising concerns about the effectiveness of the subsidy removal. According to Irdress et al. (2024), the lack of funding for essential infrastructure has limited access to basic services, particularly for vulnerable communities. The economic strain resulting from the subsidy removal has further widened the gap between the rich and the poor, deepening social inequality. Many households are now unable to afford essential services, such as healthcare and education, exacerbating the already challenging conditions

faced by poor families. As hunger and poverty continue to rise, the economic stability that the subsidy removal was supposed to deliver remains elusive, leaving Nigerian households in a precarious position.

Hence, the removal of the fuel subsidy in Nigeria has had a profound and adverse impact on the nation's citizens, intensifying inflation and exacerbating poverty and food insecurity. The abrupt removal has strained household incomes, with many Nigerians facing increased costs of living, particularly in essential areas like food, healthcare, and transportation. To mitigate the negative consequences of this policy, the Nigerian government must implement comprehensive corrective measures. This includes boosting investment in agriculture to enhance food production, providing transportation subsidies to reduce costs, and creating safety nets such as subsidized education, healthcare, and transport services for low-income groups. Additionally, it is crucial to develop long-term strategies that address the root causes of income inequality and ensure that economic growth translates into improved living standards for all Nigerians. Only through these efforts can the government reverse the current economic hardships and foster a more equitable society.

Suggestions for Mitigating the Impact of Fuel Subsidy Removal on Household Poverty and Food Security in Nigeria

The removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria has led to significant economic challenges, including rising food insecurity, inflation, and increased poverty rates, particularly among low-income households. While this policy is intended to stimulate long-term economic growth, it has placed an undue burden on many Nigerians, exacerbating the already dire social and economic conditions. To address these adverse effects, it is essential for the government to implement targeted measures that will cushion the immediate impacts on vulnerable populations and foster sustainable solutions for the future. Below are key suggestions for mitigating the negative consequences of fuel subsidy removal:

- **Improved Communication and Public Engagement:** The Nigerian government should focus on transparent communication to the public regarding the rationale behind the fuel subsidy removal, its intended benefits, and the measures being implemented to ease its negative consequences. This includes educating the public about the potential long-term economic advantages and how they will be impacted, ensuring better understanding and acceptance of the policy.
- **Targeted Public Consultation:** Engaging citizens through consultations can help to capture public concerns, especially from vulnerable populations affected by the subsidy removal. This engagement should focus on addressing their immediate needs while working collaboratively to develop long-term solutions that address the underlying challenges.
- **Short-Term Relief Measures:** The government should provide immediate relief for low-income households that are most affected by the rising cost of living due to fuel

subsidy removal. These relief measures can include cash transfers, food assistance programs, and subsidized access to transportation and essential services, which would ease the financial burden on vulnerable populations.

- **Long-Term Investment in Agriculture:** There is an urgent need for increased investment in Nigeria's agricultural sector to ensure food security and reduce reliance on fuel subsidies. The government must prioritize agricultural development through subsidies, improved farming technology, and access to markets. Supporting farmers with affordable inputs and ensuring the safety of their work will help stabilize food prices and increase local food production.
- **Addressing Insecurity to Improve Agricultural Productivity:** Insecurity remains a significant barrier to agricultural production in Nigeria, as many farmers are unable to access their farms due to the threat of violence, kidnapping, and extortion. The government must take decisive action to eliminate insecurity in farming regions, ensuring that farmers can work safely and contribute to food security without fear of violence or economic sabotage.
- **Diversifying the Economy beyond Fuel:** To reduce dependence on fuel, the government must accelerate efforts to diversify the economy, with a focus on sectors like agriculture, technology, and manufacturing. Supporting small businesses, improving access to credit, and investing in infrastructure will enable households to sustain their income and reduce the impact of the subsidy removal.
- **Strengthening Social Safety Nets:** The government should expand social safety nets, including healthcare, education, and public transportation subsidies, to ensure that vulnerable populations are not left behind as the economy adjusts to the subsidy removal. These safety nets will help to protect citizens from falling deeper into poverty while providing access to essential services at affordable rates.
- **Promoting Transparent Policy Implementation:** Transparent implementation of policies and allocation of resources is crucial for ensuring the success of the fuel subsidy removal and its associated mitigation strategies. The government must ensure that funds intended for palliative measures and development projects are appropriately allocated and reach the intended beneficiaries.

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