

The Liberalist

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Subsidy for Sale





Table of Contents

05.

An Empowerment Scandal in Nasarawa

10.

When Monarch Fought for Free Market

14.

Inside the Governance Crisis in Kenya's Kisii County

21.

Subsidy for Sale

27.

Africa's War on Digital Dissent

30.

Nigeria's 'Economic Growth' Isn't Reaching Ordinary Citizens

Editor's Note

"Africa is poor because she is not free."

Those were the words of the late Ghanaian professor and economist George Ayittey, who was often called the rebel economist for challenging the dominant thinking on Africa's development path. While many disagreed with him, accusing him of oversimplifying Africa's challenges, he asked a question that still echoes today: *Is Africa truly poor because her people are not free?*

At The Liberalist, we have spent the last three years pursuing that question through rigorous journalism. We have examined the root causes of poverty in Africa, the structural conditions driving underdevelopment, and the policies that, again and again, take power away from people and hand it to the state. In every case, we followed a simple editorial compass: freedom.

In the process, we created something new: pro-freedom journalism, a model of storytelling that centres individual liberty, limited government, and free market. By now, our webpage is full of reports and analyses showing how Africans are navigating the consequences of anti-liberty policies.

Then we decided to do more.

This Issue 1 of The Liberalist Africa is our first attempt to curate a collection of long-form investigations, in-depth analyses, and on-the-ground reports that focus entirely on one question: Is Africa poor because she is not free?

This inaugural issue comprises articles from our staff and guest writers on the theme: The Governments Gab: What African Governments Won't Tell You. Inside, you will find original stories on perverted wealth redistribution and government social programmes, irony of fake development, long-form articles on the abstract investigation on how the fear of freedom is the genesis of Africa's underdevelopment, and much more.

At The Liberalist, we believe that Africa's future depends on free people, but only when they know what freedom looks like. The Liberalist Africa is the next step in our contribution to educating the African population on what freedom and the lack thereof look like in practice.

Many Africans are frustrated by the continent's slow progress, decade after decade of underdevelopment, despite Africa's vast resources. They see governments make big promises every election cycle and watch businesses fold. For these people, the problem is in the system, and it needs to change, but to what? They are not sure. It is for them that we produced this magazine.

If you have read this note to this paragraph, I can safely guess you are one of those Africans. I hope this magazine brings you a little closer, if not entirely, to the answers you are looking for.

Abdullah Tijani

Editor, The Liberalist

An Empowerment Scandal in Nasarawa

How Nigeria's ITF Empowerment Program Failed Thousands of Young Artisans

BY USMAN YAKUBU USMAN

Many emergency victims scattered around Nigerian villages are living in a hopeless circle, as various government intervention programmes are far beyond their reach. When an ominous plant disaster struck a town in Kaduna state, the federal government said it spent ₦1.6 billion on an intervention plan to mitigate the effects on the affected farmers. Surprisingly, many victims and targeted beneficiaries lamented not receiving a dime. For several years, government policies have consumed trillions of naira.

She waited in vain for the government to provide seeds as promised. With no means to survive, her brother left the village in search of work, leaving her all alone. As of 2024, at least 7.9 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance in Nigeria, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Some were displaced by insecurity, while some by environmental degradation. Without necessary intervention, these people risk being trapped in a cycle of deprivation. Meanwhile, despite the government's claim to spend several billions of naira to lift them out of poverty, the intervention programs, touted as lifelines for the poor, rarely reach them

Abdulmudallib Ilyas in front of his house. Credit: Usman Yakubu Usman



Abdulmudallib Ilyas stood before his modest home in Wamba, Nasarawa state, and let out a long, weary sigh. The 29-year-old plumber-in-training had just been asked about the federal government's Skill-Up Artisan (SUPA) program under the Industrial Training Fund (ITF), and the mere mention of it sparked a bitter frown across his face.

"Talking about that program is like rubbing salt in a wound," he said. "It just reminds me how badly we were used and dumped." In August 2024, Ilyas was among hundreds selected in Nasarawa state to undergo a government-sponsored skills training initiative, one meant to tackle Nigeria's surging youth unemployment. The SUPA program promised practical education, startup capital, essential work tools, and certificates that would boost the employability of young artisans. A year later, many beneficiaries, including Ilyas, say they received next to nothing. "I used my own money to fuel my motorcycle every day just to attend the training," said Ilyas, who commuted nearly 27 kilometres to Akwanga over two months. "I spent over ₦3,000 every day. And in the end, all I got was a shirt, a cap, and a one-time payment of ₦20,000, that's not even enough for a drilling machine."

According to the ITF's portal, SUPA intends to provide practical, industry-relevant training to millions of Nigerian youths. Other unique benefits include certification, access to working tools and licensing of artisans to enable the trainees to thrive in the modern industry and global economy. However, based on interviews with more than a dozen participants across Nasarawa state, the participants waited for feedback that never came.

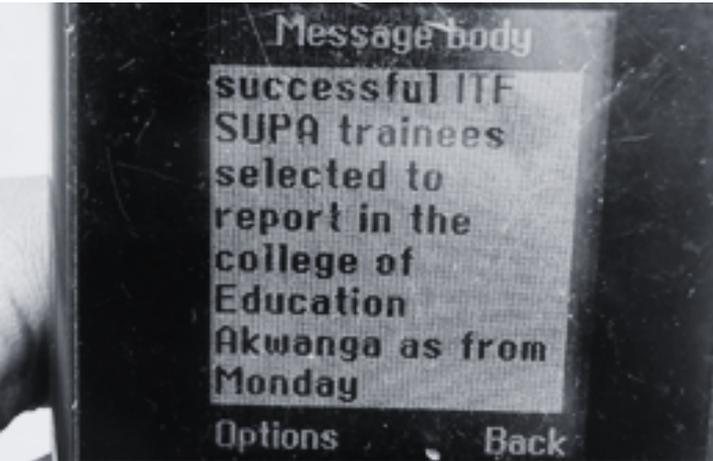
Speaking with the beneficiaries, this reporter confirmed poor planning at the ITF's SUPA training centre and outright neglect of trainees. In some cases, trainees were extorted under the pretence of administrative fees. The result is a nationwide initiative meant to empower the next generation of Nigerian artisans, but instead left many of them more broken and angrier than ever—as a government program they say continues to fail them.

Like Ilyas, Auwal Abubakar saw the SUPA program as a potential lifeline. At 32, Abubakar had been unemployed for over a decade since graduating from the College of Education in Akwanga. He was hopeful when he heard he had been selected for welding training.

"I thought finally something good had come," he said. "But the program didn't meet expectations. There was no equipment, real hands-on experience, or certificates at the end. I waited for months, thinking something would change. It never did."



The SUPA program promised practical education, startup capital, essential work tools, and certificates that would boost the employability of young artisans. A year later, many beneficiaries, including Ilyas, say they received next to nothing.



Auwal Abubakar, a selected trainee, received the text message.
Credit Usman Yakubu Usman

Another beneficiary, Yusuf Yahaya Moyi, a prospective auto mechanic, said he was particularly excited when he learned that some participants might be selected for overseas training based on exam performance. "That's what pushed me to join," Moyi said. "But after everything, we got no tools, no certificates, and the only money I received was ₦20,000. Some of my friends didn't even get that."

One of those who did not receive the money was Philimon Mangai, a carpenter, who completed the training and said he waited day after day, hoping to receive the ₦20,000 others had gotten. It never came. "People kept saying it would be sent soon, that I should wait," he said. "But it's been months. I still haven't gotten a Kobo." Mangai says what pains him more than the missing money is the absence of the equipment and certificate that could have helped him expand his carpentry business. Because "if they gave us proper tools," he said, "we could at least start something. Now I have nothing to show for my time." Abubakar Yunusa Abdullahi, a mechanic with six children, had joined the program to learn automobile engineering. He hoped the training would improve his business and help him mentor apprentices. Instead, he received a cap, a T-shirt, and nothing else.

"We are back to where we started. This whole thing was a waste of time," he said. When the program was launched in 2024, the government aimed to train five million Nigerians to upgrade their skills for job opportunities nationwide. The Punch reported that the Nigerian Federal Government commenced the skill-up training with 100,000 beneficiaries across all 774 local governments in June 2024 and vowed to continue the initiative by adding 100,000 more trainees to the scheme in 2025. According to the report, the government also planned to support 14,000 artisans' travel to the Middle East and the United Arab Emirates as part of Nigeria's partnership with the two nations.

For trainees in Nasarawa state, it all happened to be a scam.

Deception and Extortion

Zainab Kuyanbana, 23, had high hopes when she applied to learn tailoring through the SUPA initiative. After receiving a selection message, she travelled to Lafia for verification. She was later told, along with other women, to report to the Vocational Relevant Technology school in her hometown of Wamba for training. But no facilitators showed up.

After some weeks, many trainees stopped coming. Later, the women were told they had to pay ₦500 to have their documents and passports submitted to the capital city, Lafia, for further processing. After paying the sum and submitting their documents, days later, the documents were returned, untouched, and without explanation or refunds.

"The man who collected the money is still there," said Kuyanbana. "They said it was for transporting our documents to Lafia." Habiba Abdulkareem, a married woman who had also committed to the tailoring program, was one of those who paid. According to the trainees, the man who collected the ₦500 was identified as Mr. Lazarus, an official at the vocational school. When this reporter reached out to Lazarus, he denied all involvement.

"I don't know anything about that," he said. "I never collected money."

Budget documents from Nigeria's Budget Office show that in 2024, the Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Investment received over ₦22 billion in allocations. Of that, the ITF was given approximately ₦3.74 billion. According to the ITF's enabling act, the agency is also entitled to 1 percent of the annual income of every registered organisation with more than five employees. These funds are for skills training, equipment procurement, and participant stipends.

Meanwhile, despite the multisource and pool of funds available for the ITF, the resources promised to the participants went unfulfilled. Dr. Danjuma A. Umbugus, the centre manager who helped facilitate training at the College of Education in Akwanga, confirmed that roughly half the trainees were not paid the ₦20,000 stipend.

"We had over 68 centres in Nasarawa alone," he said. "In my own centre, many were not paid. I checked with others, and it's the same story."

"In a phone interview with Barrister Halima Mohammad, ITF's Area Manager in Lafia, she said the agency had



Abdulmudallib Ilyas' training kit. Credit: Usman Yakubu Usman

disbursed stipends to all eligible participants. She also denied all allegations of extortion and claimed she did not know of such.

"ITF never asked anyone to pay any money," she said.

Mohammad also said participants may not have been entitled to the SUPA startup packs if they had not received them. "There are different types of programs," she said. "Some come with tools, others don't."

But that explanation does not sit well with many trainees in Wamba, Nasarawa State, particularly women like Zainab Kuyanbana and Habiba Abdulkareem, who say they were extorted and abandoned.

Another beneficiary, a carpenter named Dahiru Abdullahi, confirmed that he, too, paid the ₦500 to Lazarus under the same pretence. "We gave him the money so our centre could be brought to Wamba. But when that didn't happen, and we had to go to Lafia ourselves, nobody returned the money."

The Liberalist returned to Mohammad with these allegations, and she said trainees with grievances should submit them in writing to the ITF office in Lafia. "We have criteria," she said. "Some didn't attend the training fully, and some gave wrong bank details. But if someone participated fully and wasn't paid, they should write to us. We'll look into it."

She also urged those whose facilitators failed to show up to report their training centres officially. "We'll address that too," she added.

SUPA's failure is not new in the Nigerian government's failed empowerment programmes; it might just be the latest. In 2019, a report revealed that under the National Social Investment Programmes (NSIP) launched in 2016, only a fraction of the 30,000 women slated to receive ₦10,000 each in Adamawa State got the funds, despite the program being in its third year. Similarly, the N-Power scheme, introduced in response to rising youth unemployment, was plagued by poor management. A Guardian report documented how beneficiaries were denied their monthly stipends and how rampant corruption and inadequate oversight ultimately forced the federal government to suspend the program in 2023.

Initiatives like TraderMoni and the Anchor Borrowers' Programmes suffered the same fate when, in June 2025, the House of Representatives launched a probe into the alleged diversion of ₦1.12 trillion from the Anchor Borrowers' Programme.



SUPA's failure is not new in the Nigerian government's failed empowerment programmes; it might just be the latest.

Dr. Bello Audu, an economist at Usmanu Danfodiyo University, said the program could have had enormous benefits if implemented properly. He said, "Programs like SUPA are designed to bridge the skills gap and provide meaningful employment. When executed well, they help communities." Unfortunately, continued corruption and lack of accountability attributed to social intervention programmes always render the initiatives useless.

"There must be a system of monitoring and serious consequences for diversion of funds. Otherwise, this will keep happening," said Dr. Audu.

Hundreds of Nigerian artisans wait for the federal government to fulfil its promise under the ITF SUPA intervention programme. Ilyas, for instance, still dreams of running his own plumbing business and training apprentices. After investing so much of his time and money, he said all he asks "is for them [federal government] to keep their promise. I'm not begging. I just want what they said they would give." ■



Owode Market, Offa, Kwara state/Offa TV

When Monarch Fought for Free Market

BY HAMMED SULAIMAN

On July 29 last year, Owode market in Nigeria's Offa Local Government Area of Kwara state woke up to confusion. The usual sounds of traders calling out prices and bargaining with customers had faded into uneasy murmurs. A day earlier, the town's monarch had disbanded market associations and ordered traders to sell at "fair competitive prices." The king's representatives had walked through the market, announcing the new rule, and by morning, the King's men were already there to enforce it.

For decades, the market associations in Offa, including yam traders, pepper sellers, palm oil merchants and others, controlled trade. They set prices and negotiated with suppliers. But in July 2024, the town monarch, Olofa of Offa, HRM Oba Mufutau Gbadamosi Esuwoye II, disbanded them, based on reports of price-fixing and profiting off inflation. His chiefs and religious leaders, on behalf of Olofa [king]-in-Council, stormed the Owode market, declaring the associations banned. "From now on, traders would operate independently to foster free trade and a stronger local economy," one of the town criers roared.

Bilikisu Azeez, known in the market as “Iyawo Actor,” stood by her stall, staring at the baskets of red peppers in front of her. She pulled her scarf tighter and shook her head. “We woke up, and everything had changed,” she muttered, her voice heavy with frustration. She shook her head. “But what can we do? Prices have skyrocketed. What we used to buy for ₦5,000 (\$3.33) now costs ₦40,000 (\$26.62), even ₦50,000 (\$33.28). The King tried, but our suppliers, those selling in bulk from the farms, haven’t lowered their prices.”

The timing was critical. Inflation had hit 34.8 percent by December last year, according to Trading Economics. Prices soared, and complaints flooded the palace. What were once fair trade unions had become price-fixing cartels, accused of hoarding goods to drive up costs. “A poor man couldn’t even afford a tuber of yam because a few traders decided it should be expensive,” said a student schooling in Offa who asked to remain anonymous. “His Majesty saw the injustice and acted.”

Reacting to a series of complaints from the people, the King dismantled the associations, banning traders from setting prices. Sellers would now compete based on real market demand and not artificial price controls. Many people in Offa hailed the decision as justice, while traders were wary of the danger of the unchecked powers of monarchs.



Bilikisu at her roadside shop, with her displayed peppers. Photo: Hammed Sulaiman

As the touch of the scorching sun escaped the temple, sacks of grains and baskets of peppers stood untouched, their rising costs pushing buyers away.

Fausiyat Ayodele sat at the entrance of her small shop, her cheek resting on her palm, staring blankly at the slow-moving crowd. She had spent years selling crops, grains, and leather, balancing trade with poultry rearing. But business was no longer predictable. Prices changed overnight, and customers now hesitated before reaching for their wallets.

“This isn’t the sellers’ fault,” she said, shaking her head. “Goods are just expensive.”



Fausiyat Ayodele. Photo: Hammed Sulaiman



Fuel costs had driven up transportation prices, forcing traders to sell at rates few could afford. A bag of maize, which had cost ₦50,000 (\$33.28) a month ago, now sold for ₦75,000 (\$49.92). Buyers grumbled, accusing traders of price inflation, but Basirat knew she was just as trapped as they were.

Traders who once relied on collective bargaining were now left to fend for themselves. "Before, market groups helped us negotiate bulk prices," Basirat admitted, adjusting the scarf on her head. "Now, everyone sells as they please."

Across the market, Alhaja Elepa, a trader, sat beneath a faded yellow umbrella. Unlike Ayodele, she opined obedience was paramount. She paused, glancing around at the market's slow-moving rhythm. "But if something isn't working, we can always reach out and suggest adjustments instead of fighting. Offa is like a single room, we should stay united, pray, and obey our King."

Market Chiefs Back King's Decision

The King's decision to disband market associations, particularly to curb price-fixing, was made in good faith, according to the Offa market chiefs. In separate interviews with The Liberalist, Chief Iyaloja of Offa General, Idiat Ige-Ishola, and Chief Babalola of Offa General, Moshood Bello, defended the directive, emphasising its necessity in ensuring fair trade.

"Nigeria is already hard enough," Idiat said. She had been among the chiefs sent to relay the King's message directly to traders. "No compulsion, no dictation. Let the seller set his own price."

For years, traders' associations had wielded influence over market prices, often restricting members from selling below a set rate. Groups like pepper sellers, palm oil traders, among others had their own rules. That system, she said, is now dismantled. Beyond price control, she pointed out another long-standing issue: dishonest measurement practices. "Some traders adjust their measuring bowls, especially the plastic ones," she noted. "We proposed iron bowls instead; those can't be resized or trimmed." Still, she acknowledged that not all aspects of market associations were harmful. "Many support each other through thrift contributions, and that's fine," she admitted. "But price control? We won't accept it. Babalola shared similar views, tracing the decision back to public complaints. According to him, the King had acted after gathering chiefs, religious leaders, and other stakeholders to discuss the situation.



Chief Babalola of Offa General, Moshood Bello. Photo: Hammed Sulaiman

"No compulsion, no dictation. Let the seller set his own price."

"On market day, we were sent to deliver a message: no group should dictate prices. Each seller is free to set their own. No one should question another on how or what they sell."

He emphasised the King's resolve: price-fixing would no longer be tolerated. "Since then," he added, "everyone has been selling individually."

'No Legal Authority to Dissolve Market Associations'

Beyond economics, the King's decree raised a fundamental legal question: Can a traditional ruler lawfully dismantle market associations? Sulaymon Tadese, a lawyer and human rights activist based in Nigeria's Southwest, argued that under Nigerian law, traditional rulers lack the authority to dissolve trade associations.

"Only the government, through the Registrar of Trade Unions, has that power," he stated, referencing the Trade Unions Act. While kings and chiefs hold significant customary influence, he explained, they have no legal standing to regulate, register, or dissolve trade unions.

Tadese pointed to Sections 8 and 19 of the Act, which vest exclusive authority in the Registrar to approve, reject, or dissolve trade unions. He also cited the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 2020, which governs the formation and dissolution of organisations, reinforcing the argument that market associations fall outside a monarch's jurisdiction.

Beyond statutory law, he emphasised the constitutional protection of traders' rights. "Section 40 of the 1999 Constitution as amended guarantees the right to freedom of association," he said. "Market traders, like all citizens, have the right to form and belong to associations. A traditional ruler cannot take that away."

He further referenced Section 17 of the Constitution, which assigns trade and commerce regulation to the government.



Iron measuring bowls switched to. Photo: Hammed Sulaiman

"The role of customary rulers is to maintain peace, not to dictate market structures," he added.

While the King's directive was framed as an economic intervention, Tadese's legal analysis suggested it was an overreach. If challenged in court, he noted, the decision could have significant legal implications. At the same time, Tadese acknowledged the moral argument behind the King's actions. From an ethical standpoint, he believes "the King's decision reflects a desire to promote fairness and justice in the marketplace," he said. "It aims to ease the suffering caused by inflation and price-fixing, which is a morally commendable goal."

However, he maintained that law and morality do not always align. "Traditional rulers may have moral authority, but legally, they cannot dissolve market associations," he concluded. "Any attempt to do so would likely be ultra vires."

The Aftermath

The King's directive had reshaped Offa's marketplace, breaking the long-standing grip of market associations and allowing traders to set their own prices. According to Idiat, the move had kept local goods affordable except for imported items, whose prices were dictated by external factors. "The state government sends agencies for market surveys," she explained. "They've seen that Offa's prices are now reasonable. Traders sell at their own prices."

One of the most notable reforms, she pointed out, was the introduction of iron measuring bowls. For years, some traders had manipulated plastic bowls to reduce quantity while charging full price. "Iron bowls can't be resized or trimmed," she said, adding that the King had approved the switch to ensure fairness.

Chief Babalola recalled how the National Bureau of Statistics had taken an interest in the policy. "When they heard about Olofa's decree, they came from Ilorin for a price survey. I led them. They now visit often and report that Offa's market prices are more stable compared to others," he said.

For him, the King's authority was absolute. "The King doesn't make suggestions; he gives orders," he stated confidently. "There are no challenges; people will continue complying."

Meanwhile, with the official structures dismantled, informal networks had taken their place. "The associations haven't truly disappeared," a trader admitted in hushed tones. "We still talk. We still decide together. But now, it happens in small groups, behind closed doors."

Adeyemi Feyisade, a free-market advocate and founder of the Chale Institute, acknowledged the King's effort to curb inflation and ease the burden on consumers but questioned the approach.

"The King may be trying to do a very good thing, but the approach may be unconstitutional in a modern democratic system such as Nigeria," he told The Liberalist. Feyisade argued that price-fixing disrupts natural economic cycles, whether imposed by traders or authorities. While making goods more affordable is a morally commendable goal, he suggested that a more balanced approach would allow market associations to operate under freedom of association while preventing them from enforcing compulsory membership or fixed prices.

"A better way," he explained, "is to let market associations exist but ensure they cannot coerce members or dictate prices."

He also raised concerns about the coercive nature of some market associations, asserting that they should not function as quasi-governmental bodies. "As non-state actors, market associations should not have the power to fix prices or compel membership, as they currently do," he said. "I don't think they even have such legal authority. They rely on coercion, which the government should not allow."

For Feyisade, the solution lies in stronger enforcement against these practices. This would ensure that markets remain competitive and free while preventing monopolistic control that could exploit consumers.

“The King may be trying to do a very good thing, but the approach may be unconstitutional in a modern democratic system such as Nigeria,”

Prince Salaudeen Tunji Oyawoye, Olofa’s Chief of Staff, said he does not support price control. He argued that forcing traders to sell at predetermined rates was unfair and counterproductive.

“It’s not fair to control ordinary people,” he said. “If you’re selling a product for ₦300 (\$0.20), and someone insists you must sell it for ₦400 (\$0.27), that’s not right.”

For him, market forces should determine prices. “Everyone should sell at their convenience. If it’s not profitable, don’t buy. I don’t dictate your price, so why should a group decide for you?” said Oyawoye. ■



Inside the Governance Crisis in Kenya's Kisii County

BY ELIZABETH ANGIRA

It is just past 7 a.m. in Nyatieko village, and the sky is still soft with dawn. Rachael Kemunto, a 34-year-old banana vendor and mother of three, balances a heavy basket of ripe bananas on her head as she begins her two-hour trek to Daraja Mbili Market in Kisii town.

"I hear the county says we are developing," she says between steps. "But I still walk on this muddy, torn road every day. We have been waiting for the road to be fixed since my firstborn was in nursery school. She's now in Form Two."

Kemunto's story echoes through the hills of Kisii County, a region that, on paper, is part of Kenya's economic transformation. Official statistics show increased county allocations and infrastructure investments. However, behind the glossy development headlines lies a different reality: communities grappling with broken promises, inaccessible services, and a widening disconnect between governance and the governed.

The appropriated County Assembly development budget for the financial year 2024/2025 is Ksh 76.7 million, which will be used to complete projects.

The Promise of Devolution, Deferred

When devolution was introduced in 2010, many hoped it would bring government closer to the people, making service delivery more responsive and inclusive.

In Kisii, citizens were promised better healthcare, improved roads, youth empowerment, and transparent budgeting. Over a decade later, that promise remains elusive for many.

"We thought development would come faster," says Samwel Bosire, a 25-year-old commercial rider from Bomachoge Chache. "But I have applied for the county youth fund three times. Each time, I am told to wait. Then I see only well-connected people getting the money."

In 2023/24, Kisii County received over KES 10 billion from the national government. Yet according to the Office of the Auditor-General, large portions of development budgets remain underutilised or poorly accounted for. In the latest report, nearly KES 300 million in pending bills and procurement inconsistencies were flagged with little follow-up or enforcement.

At the Magena dispensary, 52-year-old Linet Nyaboke, a Community Health Promoter (CHP), helps patients fill out their details in a worn-out ledger book.

"We work without pay, gloves, or medicine," she says. "Sometimes we refer mothers to Kisii Referral Hospital because our facility lacks paracetamol."

Janet is part of a network of 2,000 CHPs across Kisii, which form the first line of healthcare in villages. Despite county promises to recognise and support them formally, many remain unpaid and unsupported.

I hear the county says we are developing... But I still walk on this muddy, torn road every day. We have been waiting for the road to be fixed since my firstborn was in nursery school. She's now in Form Two.

According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), Kisii County has lower access to essential maternal and child health services than the national average. The county's 2023 budget allocated over KES 1.8 billion to health, yet interviews with locals reveal drug stock-outs, stalled dispensary renovations, and poor sanitation in multiple sub-counties. Kisii County Governor, Simba Arati, cites the digitisation of hospital systems, which has eliminated pilferage, increased revenue collection, and enabled the facility to become self-sufficient. "This has allowed us to purchase advanced medical equipment, such as safety cabinets, baby warmers, and anaesthetic machines, empowering our specialists to deliver the highest standard of care," he says.

Opaque Procurement and "Ghost" Projects

One of the most common citizen complaints is the lack of transparency in project selection, funding, and execution. At the Bomwanda junction in Kisii South, residents point to an incomplete footbridge whose construction began in 2021 and stalled within months. "It was supposed to help schoolchildren cross during the rains," says James Mokuu, a local teacher. "But the contractor disappeared, and no one will tell us why. Even the MCA is quiet."

An investigation of the Controller of Budget shows that while development projects are allocated funding, monitoring and community oversight remain weak. Residents rarely see billboards displaying project costs, contractor names, or timelines, a requirement under Kenya's Public Procurement Act.

"Accountability is a mirage," says Moraa Kwamboka, a Kisii-based women's advocacy group member. "The county assembly should be our watchdog, but many MCAs are more focused on politics than auditing budgets."

Governor Arati says the county has constructed and maintained over 721 kilometres of all-weather roads across the nine sub-counties. In the 2023/2024 financial year, the county completed 165 roads totalling 435.81 kilometres, and in 2024/2025, it also completed 139 roads covering 286.03 kilometres.

"Despite challenges such as weather-related damage, we are committed to regular maintenance and further expansion," he says.

Transparency Lacking in Procurement and Budgeting

Kisii Governance Watch, a human rights group chaired by Rachel Otundo, says that one of the root problems is poor governance, particularly a lack of transparency in how projects are awarded and implemented. Few public notices display project costs or contractor details, and many residents report being unaware of their ward budgets. Samwel Orina, a youth leader in Marani, says public participation forums are often symbolic. "They call us for meetings, hand us documents in English full of jargon, and then make decisions without us," he said. "We feel used."

Public participation, a core pillar of devolution, is also in question. The Institute of Public Finance Kenya recently ranked Kisii among the counties with low budget transparency and citizen inclusion. "They call for public forums in market centres, and then bring documents full of jargon," says John Mokuu, a youth leader in Marani. "We attend, but our ideas don't make it into the final budgets."

Local civil society groups like Rigena Human Rights are trying to change this. Budget literacy workshops and ward-level tracking equip citizens to ask hard questions and demand results. "People are waking up," says Christine Nyanchama, a community organiser in Kisii Central. "But they need protection and support. Whistleblowers are threatened or ignored."

This governance breakdown comes at a human cost. In Kitutu Chache, residents say a stalled ECDE classroom project forced children to study under trees for over a year. In Nyaribari Masaba, farmers lament poor access to markets because feeder roads remain impassable despite being "tarmacked" in the budget.



Rays of Hope

Some community members are pushing back amid the disillusionment, demanding better governance through citizen-led initiatives. In Suneka, groups of boda boda riders (christened name for commercial motorcycle riders) have started attending county assembly sittings and budget hearings, posting summaries on WhatsApp groups to educate peers. In Ogembo, women leaders are tracking health project implementation using mobile apps provided by a local NGO. These grassroots actions are making ripples. In 2023, public outcry over a ghost water project in Bobasi led to a county audit and the termination of a contractor with ties to a senior official. "We may not win every battle, but we are learning to speak the language of power," says Nyakerario. "Data, petitions, peaceful protests are our tools now." According to Dennis Anyoka, a public policy expert, public service delivery in Kisii, as in many devolved counties, is mixed. While there have been improvements in infrastructure and access points, there are major gaps in sustainability, equity, and accountability. Services often do not reach rural areas consistently, and poor planning and procurement malpractices hinder progress.

The Fight for Accountability is Local

Anyoka says this disconnect is often due to poor budget implementation, inflated project costs, limited public oversight, and political patronage in procurement. There is also a lack of citizen feedback mechanisms after budgets are passed. Projects are listed on paper but not tracked or evaluated in real-time.

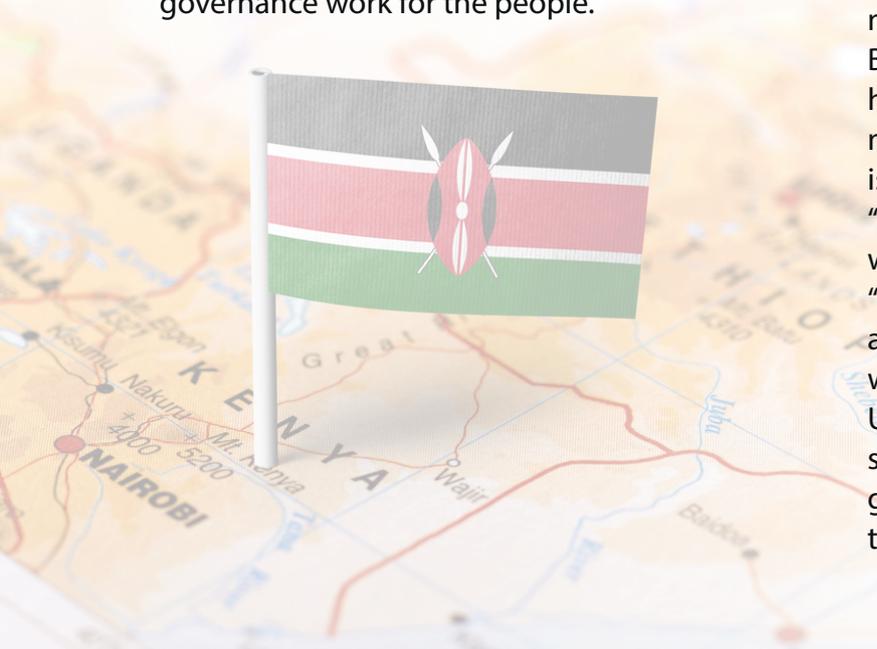
He noted that public participation is crucial in aligning government priorities with citizen needs. In Kisii, participation forums are often tokenistic or poorly communicated. “Many people do not attend because they feel their views are ignored. Without genuine dialogue and transparency in feedback incorporation, participation becomes a formality rather than a tool for accountability,” he says.

He notes that governance of some of the issues facing Kisii County today lacks transparency in procurement, incomplete or ghost projects, underutilisation of development funds, delayed payments to contractors and health workers, weak monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and minimal citizen involvement in oversight. “If we keep treating citizens like spectators, devolution will fail,” warns Anyoka “We need political will and public pressure to make governance work for the people.”

Anyoka says reforms or actions can be taken to make county governance more responsive and transparent, strengthen the County Assembly's oversight role and independence, and digitise project tracking and budget data for public access.

In addition, members of the public in rural areas, who may not understand budget jargon, still demand accountability through simplified civic education tools like vernacular radio programs, WhatsApp groups, infographics, and trained community champions. The expert says local civil society can also significantly decode budgets and translate county plans into actionable community scorecards. According to him, counties should learn from Makueni County, for example. Makueni County has developed strong structures for participatory budgeting and even has a county development fund managed with direct input from citizens. They also publish quarterly budget implementation reports and have functional public complaint mechanisms.

Back in Nyatieko, Kemunto has returned home after another long day at the market. Her feet are sore, and her basket is empty, but her resolve is intact. “We do not want handouts. We just want what we were promised,” she says. “If they fix the roads, stock the clinic, and give our children good schools, we will say, yes, the system is working.” Until then, for many in Kisii County, the system remains a distant dream glittering in reports, but crumbling on the ground. ■



Subsidy for Sale

Corruption Stains Nigeria's Farm Subsidy Programme

There were 540 beneficiaries in the Wamba community. The Liberalist discovered many were forced to pay extra fees before receiving their farm inputs.

BY USMAN YAKUBU USMAN

In September 2024, Uzairu Mohammad, a 25-year-old indigene of Wamba community in Nasarawa state, received a text message from an unknown source asking him to pay ₦53,000 to receive subsidised farm inputs. This opportunity, the text reads, was part of the National Agricultural Growth Scheme Agro-Pocket program (NAGS-AP), an initiative of the Nigerian Federal Government. At first, Mohammad could not believe that a bag of rice, three bottles of herbicide, three bags of fertilizers could be sold as low as ₦53,000, not until his uncle who had received the same text message explained the genuineness of the scheme. While the program was real, his uncle explained, Muhammad would need to pay some money to be eligible.

*Uzairu Mohammad scrolling down the content of his message on his phone.
Credit: Usman Yakubu Usman.*

“There’s another ₦6,000 bribe that you would give hand-to-hand without using an ATM card,” Mohammad recalled his brother explaining to him. “You must give that money before they verify you and give you the farm inputs,” he said.

After paying ₦53,000 as the main fee using his ATM card, he also paid the officials who were in charge of distributing the items ₦6,000 cash. The sum Mohammad was certain went straight to the officials’ pocket.

Launched through Nigeria’s Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security in 2024, the National Agricultural Growth Scheme Agro-Pocket (NAGS-AP) is a federal government intervention program introduced to support farmers in boosting food production and agricultural outputs. Specifically, 400,000 farmers across the country were expected to receive farm inputs at subsidised prices to ease the rising inflation. President Bola Tinubu’s administration had secured a \$134 million loan from the African Development Bank (AfDB) to fund the initiative, with beneficiaries expected to cultivate 250 hectares of land to bolster food security. Under the scheme, farmers receive text messages instructing them to make payments before collecting bags of seeds, fertilizers, and herbicides. However, dozens of beneficiaries interviewed by The Liberalist revealed the Nigerian government officials forced beneficiaries to pay undocumented fees when distributing the farm inputs.

In the same community as Mohammad was Umar Sufyan. The officials in charge of the farm inputs turned him away when he told them he did not have the extra ₦8,000 demanded by the officials. After borrowing the money from a close friend and returning for the farm inputs, the officials were gone.



Messages received by victims Credit: Usman Yakubu Usman

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“The officials said the extra amount is for their maintenance,” said Sufyan. “It’s one of the reasons I couldn’t get the farm inputs. But I know the government is paying them because they are government workers.”

Eyewitnesses and more than a dozen farmers interviewed by The Liberalist confirmed the government officials executing the federal government’s National Agricultural Growth Scheme Agro-Pocket Program (NAGS-AP) at the Wamba community in Nasarawa state extorted the farmers, demanded bribes, and turned away those who could not afford to pay. The officials also took back with them the remaining farm inputs, as many prospective beneficiaries struggled to raise the extorted fees.

Zainab Suleiman, a mother of five children, gave a vivid picture. After receiving the text message, she went to the distribution centre where she saw four officials in charge of distributing the farm inputs; two females and two males. One female official captured her picture and told her to move to the other side and make payment; the other female official asked for her name and then demanded the money. The other two males were busy attending to other beneficiaries. The second female official proceeded to withdraw the ₦53,000 using her ATM card, and then demanded the additional charge.

“All I paid in total was ₦63,000. I paid the main amount of ₦53,000 and an additional ₦10,000,” she said.

The officials charged the extorted fee ad valorem—as per the main amount to be paid. Since Zainab was to pay ₦53,000, she was charged ₦10,000. For Mohammad Ibrahim and Shuaibu Bala, it was ₦3,000 each, since their main payments were ₦47,375.00 and ₦44,875.00, respectively.

At some point, when some farmers who received the text to receive the subsidised items could not afford the subsidised prices and the bribes, local merchants bought out their slots by giving them a token, then received the items in their stead. One of the beneficiaries who sold their slots was Jamila Musa, 31, in the Wamba community. When she received the text message, she acknowledged she could not afford the money, but went to the distribution centre to look for a buyer. For farm inputs worth about ₦140,000, she received just ₦10,000, then watched as the merchant who had paid her settled the officials and carted away the two bags of fertilizers, three bottles of herbicides, and one bag of soybeans. Posing as a farmer, The Liberalist’s reporter visited Matan Ade’s shop, a well-known merchant in the area. During the price haggle, she revealed some beneficiaries had sold their farm inputs at cheaper prices like urea; they sold it for ₦30,000 or ₦32,000, while they sold some for ₦10,000.



When some farmers who received the text to receive the subsidised items could not afford the subsidised prices and the bribes, local merchants bought out their slots by giving them a token, then received the items in their stead.

“Whenever they [local merchants] hear that the government is sharing fertilizers, they will go and buy it. Even state government fertilizers, they bought a lot,” said Shuaibu Bala, a beneficiary who was earlier extorted ₦3,000 additional fee. “Merchants are very clever. They always change the government bag, which has the inscription ‘Not for Sale’ written on it.”

The Liberalist findings, conducted through interviews with beneficiaries and eyewitnesses, revealed that the government subsidy program became another opportunity for the officials to extort farmers and the local merchants to buy the farm inputs at a cheaper price.

Farm Subsidy for Non-farmers

The fuel subsidy removal in 2023 soared food inflation to a record high of 40 percent in June 2024. If nothing is done, a report by the World Food Program (WFP) predicted that almost 33 million Nigerians will face severe food insecurity in 2025. To curb the effects on food prices, the federal government set out to empower small and large-scale farmers to cultivate 25 hectares of land with subsidised farm inputs. However noble was the government’s subsidy intent, The Liberalist finds that many beneficiaries are non-farmers who do not own a plot of farmland at the time they received the farm inputs, which make them sell the inputs to merchants.

Among others, The Liberalist confirmed Jamila Musa is not a farmer but a teacher at Sabilul Huda Academy in Wamba local government, who sold her slot for ₦10,000, and Umar Isah Galadima, a physically-challenged man in his 40s, said while he is not a farmer, his uncle had secured the slot for him.

“We were many that went there, my sister, Aisha, got it too,” said Galadima.

Beneficiaries revealed that during the early registration process for the farm inputs, one Aminu Makpa, also a resident of the Wamba community, helped secure the slots for them, some through personal relations to Makpa and some through references.

Despite being a popular farmer in the community, Abdulmudallib Ilyasu and many of his colleagues were excluded from the program. He said he did not hear about the registration for the program until after they had already selected names. Ilyasu bemoaned the lack of transparency, adding that the slots were shared with many non-farmers who later sold the farm inputs to merchants.

“Everything was done secretly,” said Ilyasu. “The government officials were supposed to make it open to everybody to apply, but only those who have connections with those in charge were selected to get the farm inputs [including non-farmers]. If you check the community now, the real farmers are suffering while those who are not farmers are selling their slots.”



Inside Matan Ade’s shop. Credit: Usman Yakubu Usman

The Cockroach Called Corruption

Bribery and extortion are a cockroach problem in Nigeria, eating deep into the country's institutions. Past experiences show that those who engaged in corrupt practices remain steadfast in their wrongdoing until their hands are caught in the cookie jar. In 2024, the Nigerian police detained some officers for extorting over ₦2.3 million from Abuja residents; later in the same year, another constable was dismissed for receiving bribes. The cockroach found its way to the private institutions' cupboard too. In early 2015, the Skyway Aviation Handling Company (SAHCO) set up an investigation panel that sacked an aviation officer for extorting a passenger.

Nigeria's corruption problem is so rampant that the latest Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranks the country 140th out of 180 nations indexed. Commenting on the country's performance, the report confirmed "cases of corruption and related challenges...in [Nigeria] range from reports of bribery to extortions."

But beyond police misconduct and aviation scandals, cases like the one from the Wamba community show corruption is also suffocating Nigeria's agricultural sector, where smallholder farmers, the backbone of the country's food supply, are getting exploited under the guise of government aid programs.

According to section 10 of the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission Act, anyone who makes corrupt demands from others is liable for seven years imprisonment. In the same vein, the Penal Code Act punishes a public servant who receives undue gratification with a three-year sentence. Frank Ijege, a human and digital rights lawyer, confirmed that demanding extra charges from the beneficiaries amounts to bribery and extortion, which are crimes punishable under the laws.

"It is disheartening that people who are assigned to execute the government projects are extorting the farmers. It will lead to a breakdown of trust and even an increase in food prices," said Ijege. "There are laws that prohibit these conducts, especially the criminal and penal codes. Those involved should be petitioned to relevant agencies for appropriate action to be taken against them."

When this reporter contacted government officials involved in distributing farm inputs, their responses were riddled with contradictions, denials, and finger-pointing. Aminu Makpa, whom several beneficiaries pointed to as having allocated distribution slots, admitted to being present at the distribution centre but claimed the extra cash collected was meant to pay the vigilantes who serve as security guards and the laborers offloading the supplies. He insisted that the process was orchestrated by Aliyu Rime, the special adviser to the former chairman of Wamba local government, in collaboration with the agro-dealer, Ibrahim Musa, and another official, Aminu Sa'adu, widely known as Crop IT.

The Liberalist visited the office of the local vigilante Wamba command, Nasarawa state, where we met Yakubu Jabiru Mangar, the command's secretary. He refuted the claim that vigilantes were paid to guard the farm inputs at the distribution centre and said there was no record showing his members were deployed for such work.

"I am the one posting the staffs. Anything pertaining to mobilization of our members to any activity I must know about it. We haven't seen any requests of mobilization regarding the event you have mentioned. We were not involved talk more of collecting payment.

"These people were sent to come and work. Instead of using security personnel, they did not but they lied to you that they worked with us. I confirm to you that we did not see them and we have not worked there", said Jabiru.

Though Makpa denied being in charge of the distribution, he admitted to leveraging his connections at the Federal Ministry of Agriculture to secure slots through an unnamed protocol officer. Pressed on how the beneficiaries were selected, he refused to answer. Further attempts to reach him proved futile.

Meanwhile, Ibrahim Musa, the agro-dealer responsible for supplying the farm inputs, admitted to collecting payments via POS but denied involvement in the additional fees extorted from the farmers. "Many things happened outside the premises that we couldn't control," he claimed, shifting blame to the local government officials. According to him, there were 540 beneficiaries in the Wamba community. The Liberalist discovered that many were forced to pay extra fees before receiving their inputs. Former Wamba Local Government chairman Bala Asiru was quick to distance his administration from the program. "This is neither a state nor a local government initiative," he stated before refusing to answer further questions.

Since the economic effects of fuel subsidy removal prompted the government's farm input subsidy programme, experts warn that without urgent reform to the program's execution, corrupt practices will continue to deepen food insecurity and drive more farmers into poverty.

Razak Fatai, head of research and advisory at Vestance, an agricultural-focused consulting firm, argues the government needs "to enforce strict penalties for offenders and regularly audit programs. Simple, transparent systems work best," he said.

He also highlighted the role of automation in reducing human interference, saying that "digitalising the distribution process will cut out middlemen and simplify farmers' access to inputs. The government should also set up hotlines so farmers can report extortion and abuse immediately." Beyond automation, Fatai suggested public awareness campaigns where the government deploys extension workers to rural communities and uses radio and SMS in local languages to spread information. "Strong measures must be in place to punish offenders caught reselling inputs," he added.

Reaching out to one Mr Idris, commonly identified as the "headline of the program" from the Federal Ministry of Agriculture who is saddled with the responsibility of handling communication of the program, he refused to respond to the question regarding the payment of additional fee by beneficiaries. He said that he was not given permission to speak.

"I am not authorized to speak until I am given permission by the coordinator. We worked hand-in-hand with the state coordinator," he said. He also refused to give the details or contact of his coordinator when The Liberalist asked. The Liberalist tendered these findings to the Nasarawa state government through the Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Aliyu Abari. He promised to investigate, then refused to respond to follow-up messages sent to him.

"Presently, we are not in Lafia. As soon as we return to Lafia, I will conduct my investigations and get back to you," said Abari. ■

Africa's War on Digital Dissent

BY SHEREEFDEEN AHMAD

Across Africa, digital technologies have empowered people to speak up and access information like never before. But many governments are now using these same tools to silence dissent and punish critics, often under the guise of maintaining public order or protecting national security.

Last November, Nigerian police arrested 18-year-old TikTok influencer Hamdiyya Sidi. Although she was released shortly after, her ordeal didn't end there. Days later, while going to retrieve her phone from a charging station in Sokoto, armed men abducted her. They beat her, threw her from a moving tricycle, and left her with serious injuries. Hamdiyya's "offence" was speaking up about a growing humanitarian crisis in Sokoto that had already devastated her community.

Shortly after her release, the Sokoto State Government rearrested and charged her in a Sharia court for "using abusive language" and "inciting disturbance" after she criticised Governor Ahmed Aliyu in a TikTok video. Since then, Hamdiyya and her lawyer, Abba Hikima, have faced constant threats and harassment.

"These actions represent an alarming abuse of power and a calculated attempt to intimidate and punish those who speak out for their society and lawyers defending them," Amnesty International said in a statement.

Isa Sanusi, Director of Amnesty International Nigeria, said authorities should focus on protecting civilians in eastern Sokoto, where armed groups are killing people and burning villages, and leave peaceful voices like Hamdiyya's alone.

Even though Section 39 of the Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, stating that every person has the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive, the Sokoto state government is doing the opposite.

A Pattern of Digital Repression

Hamdiyya's story is one of many across the continent where governments are tightening their grip on digital spaces. According to cybersecurity firm Surfshark, while global social media restrictions dropped by 35 percent between 2020 and 2021, Africa still accounted for 53 percent of global restrictions in the same period.

Records show that in the first half of 2023 alone, six African countries, twice as many as the previous year, shut down internet access. Meanwhile, these blackouts come at a cost. In 2020, for instance, Sub-Saharan Africa lost \$237.4 million due to internet shutdowns and social media restrictions, often imposed during protests or elections. All this loss is simply because governments fear the organising power of the internet and want to control what people see and say.

Oladipupo Ige, a digital rights advocate and Director of Policy at the Data Privacy Lawyers Association of Nigeria (DPLAN), explained the common methods this way: either government slows down internet speed to make access difficult or blocks access to specific content or platforms or cuts off the internet entirely, often with the help of internet service providers

According to Access Now, an organisation that defends digital rights, internet shutdowns in Africa increased by 47 percent between 2018 and 2019. Also, Paradigm Initiative, a group focused on digital inclusion, has tracked growing censorship in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania. Among other methods to silence critics, the organisation reveals that governments use surveillance, intimidation, and arbitrary laws to silence critics online.

"Digital censorship is now a calculated effort by African governments to control information and hold on to power," said Muhammed Bello Buhari, a digital rights expert with CIVICUS, a global civil society alliance. "This includes blocking websites, tracking citizens online, and prosecuting people under vague laws."

He said censorship tactics have become more subtle and advanced over time. During Uganda's 2021 elections, for instance, the government introduced a "social media tax". In Nigeria, the indefinite Twitter suspension after the #EndSARS protests showed how far governments would go to silence dissent. As part of military operations, telecom shutdowns in the north also cut off millions from relevant information. "These tactics aren't just about controlling speech," Bello said. "They're about controlling the people."

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The Brutal Clampdown on Digital Dissent

In 2024, during the #RejectFinanceBill protests in Kenya, police abducted over 50 people for speaking out online. Among them was Billy Mwangi, a 24-year-old student.

Mwangi had just left a barbershop on his way to church when a man with a gun dragged him into a waiting vehicle. Four other young men were kidnapped the same weekend. For the next 15 days, they were tortured and kept in secret detention.

"I was beaten and tortured. It was too much," Mwangi later told The Guardian UK.

His only offence was sharing an AI-generated image of President William Ruto in a coffin, which sparked a trend online. Two others believed they were targeted for sharing similar photos.

Mwangi was released in January 2025 without any charges, but not without trauma. In an interview, he said he and his family are afraid of going out, fearful of an unknown man kidnapping them. "I can't go out. But I must move on," he said.

A report by Freedom House said Kenya's internet freedom declined sharply between 2023 and 2024. Bloggers and online users were attacked, and the government disrupted access to messaging platforms for the first time.

The Kenya Film Classification Board also stepped up censorship, banning over 1,000 music videos and partnering with TikTok to block accounts that posted explicit content.

In Tunisia, lawyer and media commentator Sonia Dahmani was sentenced to two years in prison after she criticised the country's treatment of sub-Saharan African migrants on live radio.

She was charged under Decree-Law 54, which criminalises "false news" that allegedly threatens public order. Since its introduction in 2022, the law has been used to target journalists and opposition figures.

"This decree is not meant to fight fake news," said Sadok Jammami, a Tunisian professor of information science. "It's designed to silence political critics."

Dahmani now faces several legal cases, all related to her public comments.

The Cost of Censorship

The effects of censorship are far-reaching. According to Bello Buhari, it means constant fear of arrest for journalists, and for everyday people, it discourages engagement.

"When people fear punishment for speaking online, they start to self-censor," he said. "It breaks trust in both the government and the internet."

In Cameroon, President Paul Biya has ruled for over 40 years. Last year, a social media activist, Junior Ngombe, was arrested in Douala for posting TikTok videos encouraging voter turnout and criticising the government. He's now facing charges of "inciting rebellion" and "spreading false information."

The local government warned that insulting state institutions or the president could result in a ban from the area. The Minister of Communication later released a statement condemning "disrespectful language" against President Biya.

According to Oladipupo Ige, African people deserve accountable leaders. "Citizens need free access to information to decide whether their leaders are doing the right thing," he said. "Yes, fake news is a problem. But the solution cannot be silencing everyone." ■

Nigeria's 'Economic Growth' Isn't Reaching Ordinary Citizens

BY PROMISE EZE

Benedicta Matthew, 22, juggles her undergraduate studies at the Prince Abubakar Audu University, North Central Nigeria, with a string of menial jobs, including washing clothes, assisting a cook, and delivering food to fellow students to make ends meet.

Life was turned down for her family following President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's economic reforms. Her mother's small restaurant, once the family's primary source of income, is now struggling as fewer customers can afford to eat out in today's economy.

"The economy is terrible, and it hasn't been easy being a student in times like these," Matthew said. "I can't afford to buy many handouts or pay some necessary fees. My father is a retired policeman earning ₦28,000 as a monthly pension, and we are three in school, along with my two younger siblings. What can ₦28,000 do for us?" she added, noting that she still struggles to repay the money she borrowed for rent.

"I called my father, and the innocent man burst into tears. Sometimes I feel like giving up. I just want to pack my things and go home," she said.

Matthew's experience is one of millions of Nigerians who, despite claims that Nigeria's economy is improving under President Tinubu's administration, believe these improvements have not trickled down to the poor masses, who make up over fifty per cent of the country's population.



Graphics by Akila J.

Since assuming office in May 2023, President Tinubu has rolled out a series of bold economic reforms to revive Nigeria's struggling economy. Chief among them was the removal of the decades-old fuel subsidy, which he announced on his first day in office. Supporters praised the move as necessary to curb government spending and redirect funds into infrastructure and social services. Tinubu also unified Nigeria's multiple exchange rates in an effort to attract foreign investment and stabilise the naira. These policies signalled a shift toward market-driven reforms and earned early approval from international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

According to the World Bank, the country's economy is recovering following Tinubu's reforms, with projected GDP growth of 3.6 percent and increased government revenue. The World Bank commends Tinubu's administration for improving fiscal discipline and restoring some investor confidence. However, the impact on ordinary Nigerians has been harsh. The removal of fuel subsidies caused petrol prices to more than triple, triggering a steep rise in the cost of transportation, food, and basic goods. Inflation soared to its highest levels in nearly two decades, eroding purchasing power and pushing millions deeper into poverty. Tinubu's reforms, though economically rational on paper, have sparked nationwide frustration and protests, raising critical questions about the balance between fiscal discipline and social welfare.

While the government introduced palliative measures and cash transfers to cushion the blow, experts told The Liberalist that the relief has been insufficient and unevenly distributed. They stress the need for stronger social protection systems and more robust job creation efforts, warning that unless the government pairs its macroeconomic reforms with targeted support for the poor, the economic pain felt by citizens will continue to overshadow any statistical gains.

"We have a situation where growth in Nigeria is not broad-based. It is concentrated within a particular sector, and even within that sector, the gains from that growth have not been passed down to middle- and lower-income Nigerians. The growth has somehow been streamlined to benefit only the top-income percentiles," said Ikemesit Effiong, Partner and Head of Research at SBM Intelligence.

Oliver Ekene, a provision shop owner in Sokoto metropolis, shares Effiong's views. His business has been badly hit despite the government's continuous claims that the economy is improving. He says his shop can barely cater to his family's needs.

There is hunger in the land. Compared to before, customers no longer purchase goods like they used to. They are very watchful of their salaries. People have started cutting costs. Someone who used to buy a loaf of bread worth ₦1,000 naira now asks for a cheaper one, say ₦500. Feeding and transportation are big challenges in many homes now. The price of goods and services keeps skyrocketing. I haven't seen any impact of the economic growth our leaders have been peddling," he said.

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Political Propaganda?

Nigeria's ruling party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), often uses the message of economic recovery to defend its policies and improve its public image. In press statements and public speeches, the party presents recent economic reforms as necessary for a better future.

Since President Tinubu removed the fuel subsidy and unified the exchange rate, the ruling party officials have described him as a bold leader making tough decisions to fix the economy. The party often says these reforms will bring long-term benefits, even though many Nigerians still deal with high prices and job losses.

Government relief programmes such as food distribution and cash transfers are sometimes linked to the APC or the President. Some of these activities have taken place at party events or have been widely shared with the president's image on social media. This has raised concerns among civil society groups and opposition political parties.

People who criticise government policies are sometimes labelled as enemies of progress. Critics say this approach discourages honest discussion about how the reforms affect ordinary Nigerians, especially those in the middle and lower classes.



As of today, the minimum wage is ₦70,000. In some places, a bag of rice costs around ₦60,000 to ₦70,000.

Public policy analyst Abdulwaheed Onikanhun says that while the APC's message may help the party win support, it could widen the gap between economic policies and citizens' daily struggles. Until growth benefits more Nigerians, the Kwara-based expert noted, many will continue to see the government's claims as political messaging rather than real progress.

"There is a disconnect between the leaders and the people, and the indicators show that Nigerians are not better off under this President's administration. For instance, inflation is rising. Unemployment is also increasing. Insecurity is very high. So, where is the improvement in the standard of living that they are talking about?"

"As of today, the minimum wage is ₦70,000. In some places, a bag of rice costs around ₦60,000 to ₦70,000. A civil servant on the grid-level wage in some states earns ₦75,000. However, the value of that ₦75,000 is not even close to what ₦20,000 was when the minimum wage was ₦30,000. That is a clear disconnect. Politicians will always come up with this propaganda, this false story, to paint a misleading narrative. From my experience and conversations with people, instead of improving their standard of living, people are becoming poorer by the day. Jobs are being lost. There is no improvement in infrastructure," he argued.

"No one cares about us, the poor people," said Nkechi Samuel, who sells locally made soya drinks in Dei-Dei, a suburb of Abuja, Nigeria's capital. She explained that she has to use ice blocks to keep her drinks cold because there is no steady electricity. This costs her more money and makes it hard to earn a good living.

"They keep saying the economy is improving, but I do not feel it. When my drinks spoil because there is no power, I lose money. How can my business grow if I keep losing stock like this?" she asked sadly. ■



