The Liberalist

AFRICA

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Africa, *Why E Dey Like This?*

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Editor's Note

When we launched The Liberalist Africa, our conviction was to inform our audience that freedom is a living force that brings about prosperity. But only when we know what freedom means. That conviction has not wavered. If anything, the urgency of defending liberty in Africa has only deepened.

This second volume of our first issue is another chapter in our efforts to educate the wider community of freedom advocates who believe in the promise of individual liberty and free markets.

In an age where authoritarian reflexes are tightening and economic freedom deprivation is dressed up as "reform," our task is to cut through the noise with clarity and truth.

This edition asks questions that go beyond surface politics. Why do supposed good policies not translate to prosperity? Why do certain policies persist even when their results are poor?

While this copy doesn't explicitly provide answers, you will find explorations that do more than critique the state of affairs.

Like the first volume, this edition seeks to further educate those who are curious as to why Africa is just the way it is. The essays and reflections in these pages do not simply describe these problems, they seek to find the cause. For only then can we find the cure.

As you read, I hope you don't look at this issue as just commentaries, but as something that sharpens your understanding on how Africa's present condition unfolded, and what might be possible tomorrow.

Abdullah Tijani
Editor, The Liberalist

The Liberalist

Why African Economy Serves the Few

BY FAVOUR ADEBOYE

Pwausoko Kadmiel, standing on his farm. Credit: ***Favour Adeboye***

When torrential rainstorms damaged Pwausoko Kadmiel's crops earlier this year, the 28-year-old agri-tech farmer hoped for a lifeline by turning to the government's agricultural grant program. He had applied months ago, confident his record of hard work would qualify him. But when the disbursement finally came, his phone stayed silent.

It wasn't the first time Kadmiel, who farms in Adamawa in northeastern Nigeria, felt shut out. "I have witnessed several situations where grants, land allocations, and intervention loans were only accessible to people who have personal connections or political affiliations," he told The Liberalist. "Genuine farmers who need support don't get a chance."

Across Nigeria and much of Africa, stories like Kadmiel's are all too familiar. Politically connected elites often hijack economic systems that promote opportunity, and public programs serve private interests.

While critics increasingly blame capitalism for Africa's inequality, economists and policy experts say the real villain may lie elsewhere: state overreach, cronyism, and corruption.

These experiences are part of a broader pattern where economic access hinges less on merit and more on political proximity. For farmers like Kadmiel, government interventions are frequently announced with promises of inclusion, yet only a few benefit in practice.

Even when he fulfils his civic duties, Kadmiel feels penalised. Despite his diligence in paying taxes, he says, "the high cost of land documentation and multiple taxes on agribusiness make it hard for small farmers, while big firms with influence get waivers and tax holidays."

A similar story plays out in Zimbabwe, one of Africa's most mineral-rich countries. After global lithium prices doubled in 2022, hopes soared that Zimbabwe's abundant reserves could fuel national growth. Instead, the government abruptly banned exports in March 2023 and handed control of lithium operations to a Chinese-backed, military-linked company.

Artisanal miners and private firms were sidelined.

According to data from Oxfam and the UN, the top 10 percent of Zimbabweans control nearly 60 percent of the country's income, while the bottom half share just 9.2 percent. Evidence shows this inequality is the product of post-colonial structures and elite monopolisation of opportunity, not market capitalism.

Cambridge dictionary defines capitalism as "an economic and political system in which property, business, and industry are controlled by private owners rather than by the state." Meanwhile, power remains heavily centralised in many African countries.

"What often passes for capitalism on the continent is a distorted version, a kind of cronyism dressed up as capitalism," said Mr Richardson Ojeka, founder of Africado, a non-governmental organisation.

True capitalism, he argues, thrives on fair competition, private ownership, and equal access to opportunity.

"It also encourages innovation, individual economic freedom and limited government control," said Tanatsiwa Dambuza, an international trade policy analyst and the founder of African Trade Solutions Consulting.

Experiences show Africa's problem isn't too much capitalism, it's corrupted version of the real kind. Time and again, efforts to privatise sectors without transparency or true competition have failed, and every time, it's not because markets don't work but because the state refuses to let them. For instance, Dambuza noted, Zimbabwe's attempt to privatise its Grain Marketing Board in the late 1990s was marred with political interference, mismanagement and continued reliance on government subsidies. In 2005, media reports revealed how some ministers and government officials used their political clout to buy maize from the GMB at heavily subsidised prices and resold same, in most cases, outside the the country.

"There are some businesses which the capital in year one might not yield a 10 percent profit. And there are some businesses that start with bank loans that are meant to be paid back in 5 years. Surprisingly, these businesses also pay taxes,"

Nigeria's experience in the power sector followed a similar trajectory. When the country privatised electricity distribution in 2013, the hope was to end chronic blackouts. But as Sam Amadi, the former head of Nigeria's electricity regulatory commission, later admitted, "the power sector was designed to fail. We failed to corporatise and commercialise before privatising; we privatise senselessly without paying attention to context and corporate governance, and regulatory regime; we sold to investors who lacked capacity."

In places with similar experience, like Nigeria and Zimbabwe, access to contracts, licenses, and subsidies often depends on proximity to power, not performance. This makes it harder for citizens without connections to government officials to access economic opportunities, leading to a growing backlash among young African entrepreneurs.

Kadmiel, the farmer from Adamawa, says policies on paper are often inclusive. "But in reality, they're hijacked by 'paper farmers' in cities. These are the people who don't farm but have the right contacts," he said.

For small businesses, the burden goes beyond lost grants and rigged programs. Taxation itself is another layer of roadblock. "There are some businesses which the capital in year one might not yield a 10 percent profit. And there are some businesses that start with bank loans that are meant to be paid back in 5 years. Surprisingly, these businesses also pay taxes," said Mariam Abdulkareem, co-founder of KAROM Global, a Nigerian social enterprise.

According to the African Development Bank, about 80 percent of Africa's small and medium enterprises fold within five years. While taxes are essential to governance, argues Abdulkareem, they should be scaled to reality.

"Startups with loans shouldn't be taxed in the early years," said Abdulkareem. "It's like penalising someone for trying."

Kadmiel, drawing from his experience in agriculture, argues that more market freedom, not central control, is the solution. "A cooperative economic system can work for Africa," he said. "It's more inclusive and can help smallholders like myself access markets, credit, and fair prices without being crushed by larger players."

The Mirage of East African Economic Integration

Two decades in, the East African Community remains tangled in protectionism, political ego, and paper visions.

BY MUSILA MUOKI

Lofty Speeches and Dysfunctions

In her message on Labour Day, Veronica Nduva, the East African Community Secretary General, emphasised the bloc's goals to build a strong, fair, and prosperous community. The EAC was revived in 2000 with the ambitions of creating a seamless common market, enhancing the free movement of people and goods, and leading to a political federation. Two decades later, and despite some notable gains, the dream remains just that—a dream.

Lofty speeches are often riddled with talk on dealing with non-tariff barriers, bureaucratic red tape, and protectionism, with the "coalition of the willing" doing little to enhance deeper integration. Cross-border traders still suffer, businesses lose billions, and politicians and cronies grow richer from the dysfunctions. One would, therefore, wonder when the eight-member nations will wake up and pull towards a common direction.

Photo: Pixabay

A Success Story on Paper

In 2024, the community expanded to eight members with the inclusion of Somalia, amidst interest from Ethiopia and Djibouti to join the coalition. While this is ambitious towards creating a large and more diversified common market, existing members are riddled with non-tariff barriers (NTBs). Although 26 of the target 33 NTBs were reportedly resolved in 2023, individual states continuously impose discriminatory quotas, subsidies, technical barriers, and intentional custom delays on others. These repeatedly disrupt trade flows and increase the cost of doing business within the region despite the secretariat's insistence on working to eliminate barriers.

Specifically, there has been an inconsistent application of the EAC Common External Tariff (CET), which is designed to enhance intra-trade and create a level playing field in the EAC. Stays of applications and country-specific duty remissions continued to exist, which dilute the effectiveness of the CET while distorting markets. Its maximum tariff of 35 percent, if implemented effectively, has been cited as likely to boost intra-trade by $18.9 million and create over 6,700 jobs. This is in addition to boosting revenue by 5.5 percent, reducing importation elsewhere, promoting value addition, and attracting foreign direct investment. However, despite the adoption of a four-band tariff structure, failures to implement it by member states continue to undermine the development of a consolidated regional value chain. There are at least 1,956 tariff lines under stays of application, currently led by Uganda (901), Kenya (816), Rwanda (116), Tanzania (89), and Burundi (24).

Political Tensions and Protectionism

While member states are ready to attend heads conferences and endorse the admission of new members, political disagreements and protectionist tendencies have continuously undermined EAC's integration efforts. Put into perspective, in 2024, Tanzania banned Kenya Airways' passenger flights as a retaliation measure after Kenya refused to grant Tanzania cargo flight approvals. This is part of a series of occurrences between EAC partners that include Kenya's blockage of Uganda Milk imports and Tanzania's restrictions on Kenyan onion imports out of political egos.

Photo: Pixabay

In 2013, Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda launched a fast-tracked integration plan that featured single tourist visas and the joint development of projects. However, the relationship between Kenya and Uganda had soured by 2023 over the use of oil transport corridors and import disputes and sugar smuggling among other petty disagreements. Rwanda once closed its border with Uganda for three years between 2019 and 2022 over alleged espionage, harassment of nationals and support for dissidents. The stalling of joint projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) after Uganda considered bypassing Kenya for Tanzania's Central Corridor. This casts doubt over integration aspirations and a coalition that is accused of never being about East Africans' welfare. Such actions by member states only strain diplomatic relations among sister states while also disrupting trade and economic activities, which affect businesses and consumers across the region. While delays at borders have significantly reduced to about 5 percent from 22 percent previously between Mombasa and Kigali, redundant checks are still common. Ten operational one-stop-border posts out of 12 have reduced crossing time, increasing intra-trade to about 20 percent compared to 11 percent in African trade. The bloc is, however, moving slowly to quell tendencies by its members to institute unwritten rules, sudden bans, and endless paperwork that strangles trade.

Stunted Intra-Regional Trade

The EAC intra-regional trade, despite increasing past Africa's intra-trade, has experienced subdued growth due to existing barriers. However, this has remained relatively unchanged over time, which raises questions about the state of the economy and trade. A 2024 report indicates that the total trade decreased slightly by 0.3 percent (30 basis points) to 10.9 in 2023 compared to 11.2 percent recorded in 2022.

This is in contrast to trade with the rest of the world, which grew by 2.41 percent over the same period. This is an indication of the failures of the EAC to devise mechanisms to encourage partner states the desist from imposing new barriers. With these figures, one would therefore be suspicious of member states' commitment to the regional integration goals.

A back-and-forth in waiving work and business permits between Kenya and Tanzania is a common feature that undermines cross-border investments and trade. Tanzanian President Suluhu Hassan talks trade but maintains a strict work permit rule against Kenyans and Ugandans seeking work.

Budgetary Constraints and Institutional Challenges

Despite the efforts of EAC forces to pursue peace in Congo, eastern parts of the country remain a warzone, which further undermines the envisioned free movement of people and goods. This reflects on failed efforts of the EAC secretariat and member states to create an effective mechanism for maintaining peace that is critical for revamped economic activity. This is in an area where Somalia and South Sudan are equally on and off war weighing further down on trade growth. Kigali and Kampala have also been accused of backing rival militias in Congo

raising questions around member states undermining peace efforts. In the face of these and other legal battles belittling EAC efforts, the EAC Court of Justice remains a toothless entity, with Uganda and Burundi, for instance, yet to ratify its protocol for effective enforcement. As of November 2024, member states owed over $76 million in unremitted contributions with South Sudan and Congo yet to pay a cent of the expected contributions. Only Kenya had paid its dues in full, highlighting how underfunding has affected EAC's capacity to carry out activities and programs. The reliance on an equal-share model of funding for 65% of the budget is another challenge that persists among nations that have varying economic sizes. This further complicates the EAC financial stability imperative.

Addressing a Governance Gap

Despite the praises on the EAC owing to misalignment and poor performance of other trade blocs across the continent, the realised gains hardly reflect the aspirations of the community 25 years in. The time for the community to eliminate non-tariff barriers is now, by strengthening mechanisms for the identification and resolution of NTBs through timely and effective action. The secretariat must also engage individual governments to discourage the imposition of undue barriers despite existing mechanisms that provide for more open borders.This calls for accelerated effort to drive the uniform application of the CET while minimising country-specific exemptions to create a level playing field for all.

Trust and political commitments remain a significant challenge for the EAC. Bickering among presidents over milk and chicken imports ought to be buried in the past, and for good.
The secretariat's role, especially in meeting critical operational needs, has been impeded by funding challenges due to individual states' failures. The EAC requires an improved model for financial sustainability that can be realised through a funding model that reflects the economic capabilities and needs of member states, with the enforcement of timely contributions. This would go a long way in strengthening institutional capacities for the effective implementation and monitoring of integration initiatives.
The EAC's vision for a fully integrated regional bloc is still a mirage. Member states have failed to address underlying governance issues that hinder progress, while individual leaders' actions pull others backwards. An end to leadership ego would allow for the confrontation of non-tariff barriers, harmonisation of trade policies, and demonstration of genuine political commitment.

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The Human Cost of Ecological Corruption

BY HAMMED SULAIMAN

Flooded and ravaged areas in Maiduguri, Borno state

In early September 2024, the people of Maiduguri, Borno state's bustling capital city in northeastern Nigeria, awoke to the sound of rushing water. The Alau Dam, which had long been the backbone of the city's water supply and irrigation systems, had failed. Torrential rains had battered its ageing structure, sending torrents of water crashing through its weakened walls. Within hours, the running water quickly submerged the entire neighbourhood, with families scrambling to higher ground. Reports reveal the catastrophic flooding submerged 70 percent of Maiduguri, displaced 300,000 people and damaged thousands of buildings, affecting up to one million people. The disaster also resulted in the escape of over 270 inmates from a prison and the release of dangerous animals from the Sanda Kyarimi Park Zoo into residential areas.

The state governor, Babagana Zulum, arrived at the scene. His face, often hardened by years of dealing with the region's most pressing crisis and insecurity, softened with visible grief as he surveyed the damage. "I am disturbed by the calamity that befell us," he said. "We are doing everything possible to provide relief to our people."

However, investigations revealed that the collapse of the Alau Dam is a disturbing example of how corruption turns natural hazards into full-blown disasters. A HumAngle Media report showed that the "dam has suffered years of devastating decay, despite multimillion-dollar funds disbursed for its rehabilitation."

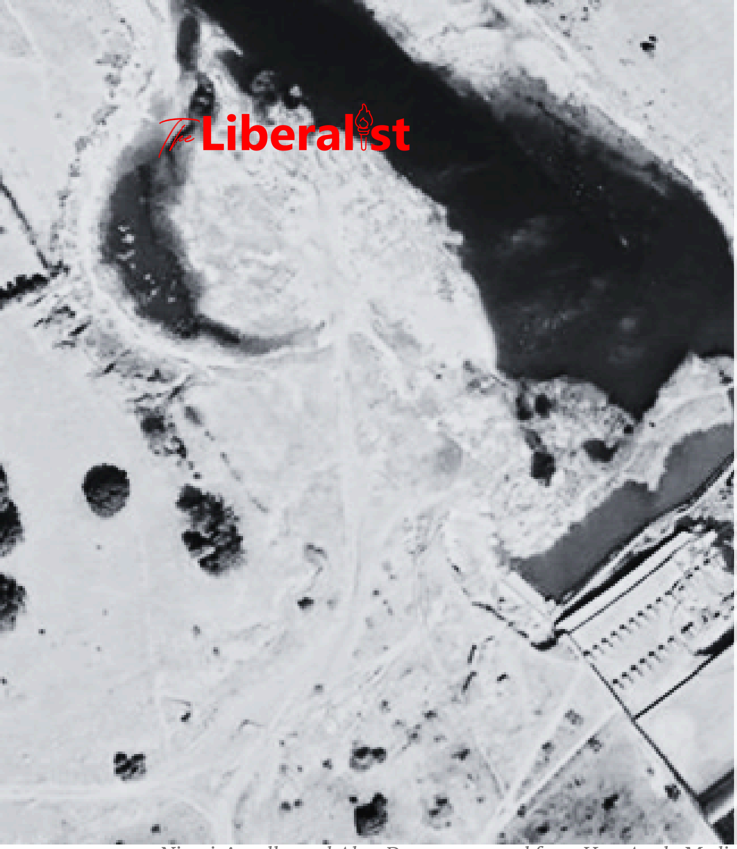
Across Africa, floods are becoming more frequent and severe, not just because of climate change but also because of the silent decay and nonexistence of public infrastructure neglected by those trusted to protect it.

When Dams Become Time Bombs

Dr. Yusuf Isa, a chief lecturer at Umar Ali Shinkafi Polytechnic, Sokoto, in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, College of Environmental Studies, described floods as primarily driven by excessive rainfall that exceeds river capacities, washing away farms, homes, and critical infrastructure. He told The Liberalist that "floods have become a perennial issue in Nigeria, and mostly occur when water exceeds the capacity of a river channel, thereby overflowing into farmlands and communities."

Alau Dam was built between 1984 and 1986. For years, it has been a lifeline for Maiduguri's farmers in Northeastern Nigeria, providing water for irrigation and supporting local livelihoods. But beneath its surface, a perfect storm was brewing; years of neglect, lack of maintenance, and insufficient funding have taken a toll on the dam's structure, making it increasingly vulnerable to collapse. And when disaster struck, the catastrophe became imminent.

Experts like Isah stated such catastrophes "wash away the farm products of the farmers, and, awfully, the fertile soil in the area, even wash away their properties. And at times, it washes away the equipment and instruments used in the farmlands. And this seriously could lead to the loss of billions of Naira, and at times, it could lead to the loss of lives."



Nigeria's collapsed Alau Dam as sourced from HumAngle Medi

However, reports revealed that the Alau Dam collapse was not natural. For instance, a PUNCH report in September last year showed that the Nigerian government pledged to "upgrade" the Dam to prevent future flooding. But an investigation by HumAngle Media revealed that the hundreds of millions of naira disbursed for dam rehabilitation in the past ended in the wind, mismanaged or misappropriated. The government's commitment to upgrading the dam proves its history of issues. Past incidents include the 1994 collapse, which displaced nearly 400,000 families, and the 2012 flooding caused by torrential rainfall. According to OkayNG, satellite images revealed that the dam's structure was compromised, with water overflowing and damaging the dam's walls between August and October 2022. While the most recent collapse occurred on September 10, 2024, caused President Bola Tinubu to approve a ₦80 billion intervention fund for its reconstruction and upgrade, according to a report by the Foundation for Investigative Journalism (FIJ), the federal government had budgeted a total of ₦762 million for repairs over the previous 12 months.

After the September 2024 incident, Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) called on President Bola Tinubu to direct the Attorney General of the Federation and anti-corruption agencies to investigate the alleged mismanagement of billions of naira in the Ecological Fund collected by Borno state since 2001, including ₦816 million collected between January and June 2024, and to prosecute suspected perpetrators. However, no official announcements have asked the Attorney General to do so.
Meanwhile, this is not a Nigerian problem. While ecological crises have a natural tendency, they are triggered and exacerbated by years of government neglect or negligence in many parts of Africa. In May 2018, Kenya's Patel Dam wall in Solai, Nakuru County, fell apart after heavy rainfall. The resulting deluge killed more than 40 people and left hundreds homeless. Authorities later discovered that the dam was built illegally without environmental assessments because its owners used political connections to bypass safety regulations. The dam has been a ticking time bomb for more than 15 years since its construction between 1998 and 2003.
When Cyclone Idai struck Mozambique in March 2019, poorly maintained dams and drainage systems failed catastrophically. The resulting floods killed hundreds of people and displaced hundreds of thousands. Post-disaster audits revealed that millions in aid funds meant for flood defences were siphoned off through inflated contracts and shell companies.
Dr. Isah emphasised that "flood control and abutment should focus on building resilient roads, bridges, culverts, and drainages that can withstand floods. These are not luxuries, they are necessities." He lamented that African countries' persistent failure to maintain their flood defences is a result of corruption and mismanagement that leave vulnerable communities exposed.

Ecological Funds; Lost to Greed

Nigeria pegged its Ecological Fund to build adaptive and protective infrastructure against erosion, flooding, and other environmental challenges. It is a federal financial reservoir, collecting 2.3 percent of the Federation Account to respond to ecological disasters. According to Dataphyte, between 2021 and 2022, Nigerian states received a total of ₦64.4 billion for environmental projects, yet the impact on the ground remains almost invisible.

Nigeria's weather emergency management agencies, like the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NiMet), and the Nigerian Hydrological Services Agency (NIHSA), often warn of impending floods. Still, their cries always seem to fall on deaf ears. Last year, the Federal Ministry of Water Resources predicted 31 states would be at risk of flooding, yet the response was lukewarm. For example, floods in Bauchi state claimed 24 lives, injured at least 163 people, and displaced over 122,000 individuals in 2024 despite warnings.

Nationwide, a report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in 2024 found that floods affected 31 states in the past year, resulting in over 300 deaths and impacting more than 1.2 million people. But despite the Ecological Fund to mitigate environmental disasters, it is a treasure trove for some. An investigation by the Foundation for Investigative Journalism (FIJ) revealed that 12 out of 36 states spent less than their allocated funds on environmental protection projects. Eight states performed abysmally, spending below 50 percent of their allocations. Zamfara State, for instance, received over ₦1.25 billion in 2024 alone. However, according to a report by SolaceBase, none of this money was spent on flood control or erosion projects. Instead, the funds were redirected to "administrative costs" and "security logistics," vague terminologies often used to cloak corruption.

Nigeria's collapsed Alau Dam as sourced from HumAngle Media

The Human Cost of Corruption

The price of ecological corruption is that the most vulnerable pay the price. When the Alau Dam collapsed, hundreds of families left their homes, and temporary camps sprang up around Maiduguri, with thousands crowded into makeshift shelters. Women and children slept under tarps, and the smell of stagnant water filled the air. The situation added to the existing conflict-driven humanitarian crisis in the region.

Experts believe more African nations need to be transparent. Countries like Rwanda have demonstrated that it is possible to manage ecological challenges with transparency. The government implemented broader environmental management strategies to enhance flood forecasting and water resource management, including establishing hydrological monitoring stations by the Rwanda Water Resources Board (RWB) and the Nile Basin Initiative.

"We must prepare, prevent, and respond to floods with proper planning and effective infrastructure like dams and flood walls," says Dr. Isah.

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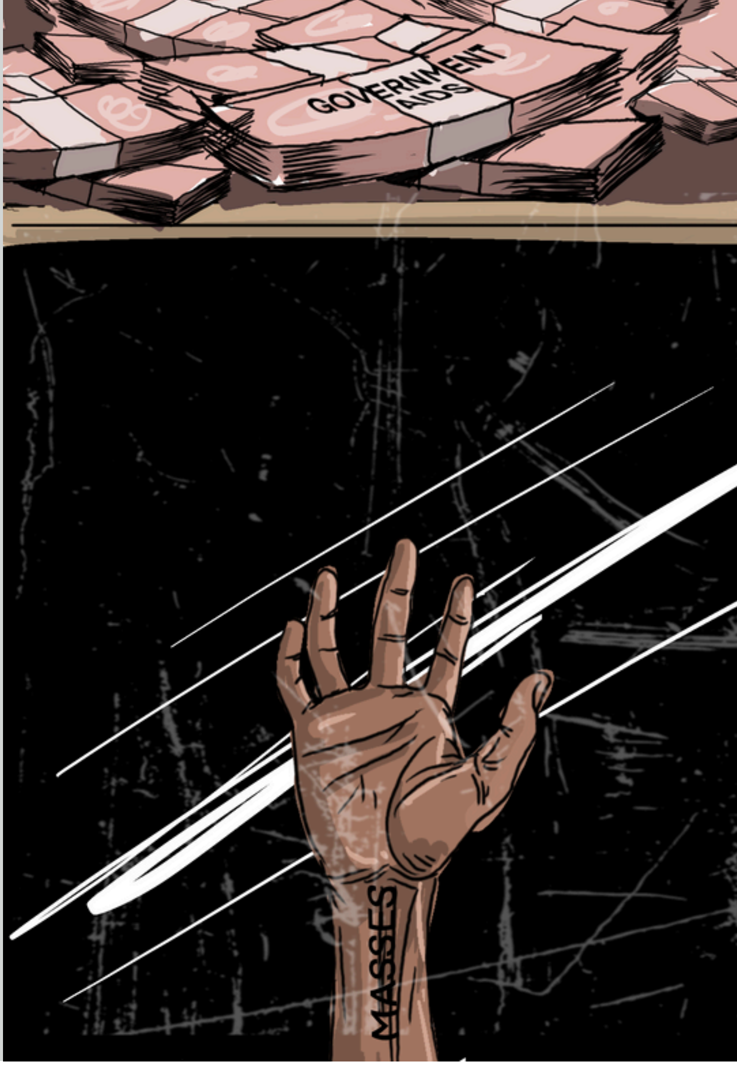
Why Govt Aids Are Not Reaching the Poor

From an alternate perspective, a pan-African study finds that Nigeria's political leaders have weaponised social policies for short-term electoral gains, prioritising optics over sustainability.

BY USMAN YAKUBU USMAN



Illustrations by Akila J.

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. Often, targeted communities either receive no help or the government's responses are insignificant in proportion to the community's needs. According to a Premium Times report, one Alice Abel, a villager in the Kachia local government area of Kaduna state, lost her farm field to disease.

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

Victoria Alkali, a farmer in Nasarawa state, became entrapped amid the rising inflation crisis. She had vested her interest in government agricultural loans that eluded her. To stave off starvation in her family, Alkali saves her four children by feeding them cassava flour every day.

The troubles within the homes of average Nigerians are in contrast to the rituals of aid programs that trail the country. Alkali troubles, specifically, are exacerbated on the backdrop of the state government's failed promise to distribute 26,000 bags of fertilizers to smallholder farmers. Failed implementation has turned government aid into frustration rather than an antidote for people's ills.

Foreign aid has long supplemented Nigeria's inadequate welfare system, with organisations like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding food security and humanitarian relief. As the USAID shuts operations, the gap created by the government's aid inefficiency is certain to expose.

Based on Nigeria's budgetary allocations for social programmes, experts argued the country is rich enough to cater for its emergency needs without foreign aid. For instance, President Tinubu earmarked ₦150 billion to alleviate people from poverty in 2024. In the latest budget approved by the Nigerian parliament, the government also budgeted N10 billion for the Ministry of Humanitarian

Affairs. Unfortunately, despite the trajectory of funds allocated for poverty alleviation, more people are surprisingly recorded sinking into poverty.

According to the World Bank, the poverty rate in Nigeria clocked 46 percent in 2023 up from 40 percent in 2018, pushing the number of people in poverty above 100 million.

Illustrations by Akila J.

More Money, No Impact

Subsidy removal has increased the amount of government allocations shared at the national and sub-national levels. In December 2024, Nigeria's three tiers of government shared a total of ₦1.4 trillion, a significant sum experts say could help governors enhance the quality of life in their states. But poverty situations refuse to subside, especially in the most affected places.

Sokoto state, for instance, presented a ₦270.1 billion budget in 2024. In its defence, Governor Ahmad Aliyu emphasised the implementation of a social protection policy to support the "poor and vulnerable" people in the state. According to a report, some of the state's poorest residents received N10,000 monthly as part of a government intervention initiative.

Meanwhile, in Taraba state, the government rolled out a ₦311 billion budget, pledging to improve service delivery and enhance citizens' well-being. The government claimed it distributed ₦524 million to 10,409 beneficiaries to ease economic hardship.

However, despite these substantial budgets and acclaimed social intervention programs, Sokoto and Taraba states continue to top Nigeria's poverty index, contradicting the narrative of economic relief and support.

As many villagers in Nigeria grapple with hunger and poverty, experts observed that government support is not reaching the needy in rural areas.

From an alternate perspective, a pan-African study finds that Nigeria's political leaders have weaponised social policies for short-term electoral gains, prioritising optics over sustainability.

The troubles within the homes of average Nigerians are in contrast to the rituals of aid programs that trail the country.

The labour unions also condemned the government's lack of accountability, arguing that intervention programs rarely reach their intended beneficiaries.

Azeez Salawu, the founder of Community Action for Food Security, faults the social programme's poor implementation and blames the interference of those who mostly hijacked aid distribution. He noted that integrating technology to track input distribution and payment to ensure transparency is vital for humanitarian support and helps prevent fraud.

"There is a need for the government to strengthen the distribution channel. Local cooperative or community leaders will help to avoid interference," said Salawu. "If villagers are not supported, unemployment will increase in rural communities and there will be inconsistencies in agricultural production."

Africa, *Why E Dey Like This?*

This is an abstract investigation into how bad policy, too much government, and fear of freedom keep the continent poor.

BY ABDULLAH TIJANI

When African governments pledged to uplift their citizens from the vestiges of colonialism, they turned to regulation as the chosen transformation tool. In theory, regulation would serve the public good, protecting local industries and guaranteeing the welfare of the people. In practice, regulation became an albatross, fostered inefficiency, bred corruption, and suffocated the private sector that is supposed to be the engine of innovation and prosperity.

For many years, in many parts of Africa, we have been taught to see governments as the answer to every problem. If there is poverty, we ask what the government can do. If schools fail, we wait for a new policy; if there is no work, we hope for a government job. But what if we have been looking at things the wrong way? What if it is time to ask different questions, not about what leaders should do, but how much they must avoid doing in the first place? Some people believe freedom is dangerous and must be controlled for society to be safe. But this has only led to systems that create god-like politicians who hold unchecked power.

Illustrations: Akila J.

This is not how progress happens.
Actual progress comes when people are trusted to take charge of their own lives, when a farmer can sell his crops freely, when a young woman can start a business without paying bribes to get a permit, when a journalist can write the truth without being threatened.
This is not to say the government should disappear. But it should know its limits. Its role is not to control every part of life but to protect the space where freedom can grow. When the government tries to do everything, it often ends up doing nothing well. Worse, it takes away the people's power to empower politicians and the citizens' wealth to enrich their cronies.
Some say the government redistributes wealth, taking from the rich to give to the poor, like a modern-day Robin Hood with a presidential seal and big mansion. But those who say this often haven't examined the roots of their belief. They speak of wealth redistribution as a magic wand that turns poverty into prosperity. Yet look around. How many poor people do you know who were truly lifted out of poverty by the hand of the government? Now, look again and see how many politicians have become millionaires simply by climbing into office.
The truth is that wealth redistribution, as evident in many African countries, is not a pipeline to prosperity or social justice; it is a tunnel that drains public resources into the private vaults of the political class. The money meant to serve the many becomes the reward of the few.
If the wealth redistribution is anything, it's a masquerade of corruption.

Some will point to other nations and say, "But look, it works there". They say, "In sane climes, the government pays for education, healthcare, housing, and more." And yes, the state provides a broad range of social services in some wealthier countries like Sweden, Canada, Germany, or even the United Kingdom. However, what is often overlooked is how these nations got there, the fact that they began with production, not redistribution.
The developed countries have long histories of economic freedom, long before they had welfare states. For decades, in some cases centuries, they built strong economies anchored in innovation, property rights, trade, and the rule of law. Private businesses generated the wealth that later made public programs possible. And such support is funded by people who work and trade freely. The wealth came first, and the redistribution came after. But even there, the debate continues.

How many poor people do you know who were truly lifted out of poverty by the hand of the government? Now, look again and see how many politicians have become millionaires simply by climbing into office.

In these nations, redistribution was not the engine of development. The power came from freedom. The prosperity that funds their social services today was earned by free people making voluntary choices in open markets, by people who do not need permission to start or own a business.

In our context, the math does not add up or does the morality. You cannot share what you have not created. You cannot lift people by pulling others down. Our public sectors are inefficient, our tax systems crush the poor more than the rich, and our safety nets often feel more like traps. What we call "redistribution" usually ends up being "recycling"—money moves from the people, through the bureaucracy, and back to the politicians.

If the developed nations are the model of Africa's welfare states, the problem is they (African nations) are trying to skip the hard part. We are redistributing wealth before we have created it and drawing from wells that were never dug. The government promises free healthcare when hospitals are crumbling, or free education when schools do not even have chairs. They announce cash transfers and subsidies as if they are distributing harvests, when bandits have already chased farmers away from the farm.

It is like building a roof before laying a foundation, it collapses every time.

In our countries, redistribution often does not redistribute wealth; it redistributes scarcity. It takes from a thin layer of productive citizens through taxes or government debt and tries to stretch those resources across millions. The aftermath: either it evaporates in the hot winds of corruption or clogs in the web of inefficiency.

Our public sectors are inefficient, our tax systems crush the poor more than the rich, and our safety nets often feel more like traps.

But no nation has ever redistributed its way to greatness. Wealth must first be created. And wealth creation requires freedom to own property, compete, innovate, keep the fruit of one's labour, and trade without arbitrary interference. That is the path we must walk, not because it is the only way to build prosperity, but because it is honest and moral. It puts freedom in the hands of the people, freedom to build and realise one's potential.

Meanwhile, to say the government should not redistribute wealth is not to say we should not help our neighbours or that we cannot lift people out of poverty. On the contrary, we can—and do. When people are free to work, keep what they earn, and choose how they give, they help each other better through voluntary cooperation and not forced taxation.

Free markets, where people can trade and create without unfair restrictions, are about prosperity. When people earn a living through their effort and are allowed to innovate and compete, they feel a sense of pride, and society becomes richer.

These explanations are often misunderstood in Africa. Some think they are foreign ideas—western ideas, they say. But they are not. They are rooted in the simple truth that every human has the right to act for themselves and live without being constantly told what to do.

The morality of free markets

There is something deeply human about being able to earn a living through one's own effort, about waking up with a purpose, doing something useful, and being rewarded for it in a way that brings dignity. The ability to provide for oneself and one's family without begging, stealing, or waiting for a favour is one of the most apparent signs that a society is working. And for all its imperfections, the system that has allowed more people to do this across time and place is the system of free exchange—what we call the free market.

It is easy to misunderstand markets, especially in places where they have never been allowed to function fully. Markets are not just about buying and selling; one person has a need, another has a solution, and both freely and voluntarily agree to trade and exchange values. Markets work best because they are driven by mutual benefit, by people finding ways to solve problems for one another. One party gives up what it considers less valuable for what it considers more valuable. No one is forced, no one needs to be tipped for trying, and no one needs to know the president, a minister, a parliament member or a governor to engage in this kind of transaction. That is the quiet beauty of a real [free] market.

Contrast this with environments where the state tries to manage every transaction, setting prices of goods, dictating minimum wage, determining winners and losers, or deciding who may enter which industry. Does this look like what we have in many African countries or what some Africans clamour for?

To trace the root of African socioeconomic system is the result of a deep philosophical error—the belief that freedom is dangerous and that individuals must be controlled for society to progress. After independence, many African leaders embraced grand ideologies that placed the state at the centre of everything. Under African socialism, pan-African statism, and other versions of what was often called "developmentalism," the idea of individual liberty was quietly abandoned. The citizen was no longer seen as an upright, rational being or someone who has the mental capacity to decide for his life, but as an imbecile who must be managed and as a wicked being who would not help his neighbours unless he is forced to do so.

The [free] market, which became a space for innovation in other societies, was painted as foreign, greedy, or dangerous; it was not trusted as a natural extension of human cooperation but feared as a tool of exploitation. The result was first a rejection of the individual as a capable moral agent, then a rejection of free enterprise.

And yet, long before any colonial power set foot on African soil, markets existed—vibrant, adaptive, and rooted in the everyday lives of people. Free markets were not imported ideas; they were part of local life, run by women and men who understood the rhythms of trade and the value of trust; they were governed by customs, and they worked because they were built on mutual need and voluntary exchange. The colonial state did not create [free] markets, it disrupted them. And the post-colonial state, instead of restoring what had been damaged, replaced it with central planning and official programs written far from the people they were meant to serve.

Over the decades, African economies have carried the weight of a story that always blames someone else: colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, and even global capitalism. And while these forces played a role in African countries' socio-economic conditions, they are not the reason progress has stalled on the continent. Too often ignored is the damage caused by homegrown decisions: laws written without regard for local needs, ministries created to solve problems they did not understand, regulations creating arbitrary permits and licences, and a stubborn faith in government power even after it had repeatedly failed to deliver. The state became the planner, the owner, the referee, and the player who runs enterprises, writes the rules, and chooses who gets to compete.

In places like Nigeria, the path to becoming a legal business owner is so tangled that it often seems designed to break the spirit. One must register with the Corporate Affairs Commission, obtain a tax ID, register with local authorities, and—depending on the industry—apply for multiple permits, sometimes from different ministries and departments that may not even know of each other.

A street vendor in Lagos may be stopped and taxed by five different agencies, with each demanding payment and few offering receipts. And the more a business grows, the more tax it pays and the more the regulatory compliance becomes complicated.

It is not uncommon in many African cities for small business owners to begin each day by thinking about how to navigate those who stand in their way. The daily calculus is about which tax to pay, what law might be enforced, and whether the cost of compliance will leave anything left to survive. When governance is structured so that merely existing as an entrepreneur feels like an act of resistance, monitored and constantly scrutinised, the trust that work pays off or dignity can come through enterprise begins to decay.

This erosion of trust is more than an economic problem, it questions even a public morality. A society that punishes growth cannot value justice, and a government that grants licenses for creativity cannot claim to serve the public good. In such a world, the rules stop being tools for order and become instruments of discretion—flexible for the powerful and rigid for the rest. And where discretion governs, quality and equality disappear.

What has often been misunderstood about markets, especially by those who try to control or tightly regulate them, is that they are not merely places where goods and services are exchanged or profit is pursued; they are places where freedom lives. In its truest form, a market is a space where people make choices, pursue their dreams, and improve their lives. People interact with what they are willing to give and what they hope to receive.


Photo: Pixabay

To buy and sell is not only to trade items but to say: this is what I need, what I believe is fair, and what I am willing to work for. Each transaction is a decision made freely and voluntarily, an agreement between minds that trust one another enough to exchange. In this way, the market becomes a mirror of the soul of society, economically and ethically. A person is free as much as he is free to make a living.

This is why attempts to tightly control markets often do more harm than good. When every transaction must pass through layers of bureaucracy and licenses are hard to get, only the connected can trade freely. The message becomes clear: freedom is not for everyone but for those who can afford it. The more licences or permits needed to start a business or the more departments needed to validate your business or transaction, the harder it becomes to make a living.

Those who fear freedom often fear [free] markets because in a functioning market, no one is forced to accept a bad deal—not the buyer or the seller. In such a space, people must compete by offering something others want. Political connections cannot protect inefficiency there, and favouritism cannot pardon failure.

But when markets are stifled through unnecessary licenses, arbitrary price controls, or monopolies granted by the state, what is being denied is not just growth; a person can shape their life. So the market must not be viewed just as a tool for profit. It must be seen for what it is at its core: a space where people are allowed to act freely, to express their needs honestly, and to meet one another in the spirit of mutual benefit.

Meanwhile, these principles were understood and quietly at work in many traditional African settings long before economists gave them names.

Everywhere, people traded across ethnic lines and linguistic differences; cattle markets in the Sahel, kola nut exchanges in the forest zones, and caravan networks that crossed kingdoms all operated with a deep understanding of value and trust. There was no central plan or ministry of trade, only the human instinct to cooperate. And it worked.

To dismiss this history is to sever African identity from African enterprise. It is to pretend that the [free] market was always foreign and that wealth could only come from the government. But that is not true. Africa was not poor because it lacked commerce; it became poor when colonialists introduced regulations, and further became poor when successive African leaders expanded those controls in the name of development. After the colonialists left, the market was not restored; it was replaced with ministries, permits, task forces, and five-year plans that successive governments continually renew. Post-colonial African societies experienced how African elites picked up and polished the tools that once shackled the continent.

What makes the free market moral is not that it guarantees equal outcomes, but that it allows equal access to try. No one is asked where they were born or whom they voted for before they are allowed to trade. A good idea has value regardless of its origin; in this sense, free markets are more egalitarian than most political systems. They do not offer wealth through redistribution, only through equal opportunity to create wealth. History shows that the greatest leaps in human progress have come from the unleashed potential of individuals finding ways to meet each other's needs.

That kind of progress cannot be planned from a capital city; it must be allowed to manifest. Ultimately, it is not the paperwork or taxes that harm African enterprises; the real obstacle is the message behind them—the idea that politics must validate value. Until people's understanding is overturned in the direction of the free market, no regulation, however well-written, will save what has been lost.

Africa's colonial masters killed free market in the continent, early nationalists buried it.

Palliative Economy Dashing the Poor's Hope in Africa

BY BASIT JAMIU

Under a fading, white-light apartment in Keffi, North Central Nigeria, Haneefah AbdulHakim sat on a mat, her flowing hijab billowing occasionally amidst a soundless, rechargeable fan. With eyes that told stories of hope and heartbreak, she recounted the day that had irrevocably altered her life.

"At the time, I was heavily pregnant and was weeks away from delivery," Haneefah told The Liberalist, her voice quiet but steady. The memory remains vivid, she said, standing for hours under the sun in July 2024, her clothes and hijab soaked through with sweat as she waited for a palliative bag of rice. It was a gesture meant to ease hardship in a nation reeling from economic downturn.

Haneefah at her friend's house. Photo credit: Basit Jamiu/The Liberalist.

Standing for hours under the sun in July 2024, her clothes and hijab soaked through with sweat as she waited for a palliative bag of rice."

That 25kg bag, emblematic of the government's emergency relief package, was supposed to provide a lifeline. Instead, in its urgency to offer temporary solace, it became a memento of a system that exposed its most vulnerable even more.

For Haneefah, the long wait was more than a tedious inconvenience. The physical toll of the day left her feeling dizzy and weak, she narrated. She said it was a weakness she could not put entirely aside, particularly when she remembered the pain in her abdomen afterwards. Although she could not definitively say that the ordeal directly led to the stillbirth of her child, she carried the memory of that loss as a constant companion.

When she finally returned home with the rice, the precious commodity had to be divided among family members, barely enough to last her household a month. In the aftermath, instead of relief, she was met with a stark realisation: the palliative had failed to mend the holes of hunger dug out by economic hardship in her life.

Haneefah's experience is one among many. It is the lived experience of countless Nigerians struggling to make ends meet amid policies that promise much and deliver little or nothing.

Palliative is not a Solution

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Rising Economic Hardship in Nigeria

Nigeria's economic backdrop has become a mosaic of broken promises and unfulfilled needs in recent years. Following President Bola Tinubu's administration's removal of fuel subsidies, the government turned to rice palliatives as a quick fix in 2024, rolling out multiple distribution rounds across the federation.

The palliative system, branded as an emergency response to soaring food prices and inflation, was heralded to cushion the blow for ordinary citizens. Yet, for many like Haneefah, the intervention was a temporary bandage on a much deeper wound.

The image of Haneefah, a pregnant woman at the time, waiting in line resonates deeply. It is a scene often seen repeatedly in numerous communities where palliatives, often in 25kg or 50kg bags of rice, are distributed. However, for many beneficiaries, the quantity is woefully insufficient.

Palliative is not a Solution

The government's palliative measures have since come under intense scrutiny. Many Nigerians said these measures address only the symptoms while ignoring the root causes of poverty and food insecurity.

Research has shown a similar pattern: while hundreds of millions of naira are expended on rice distributions, the food inflation remains unmitigated, and many Nigerians continue to struggle in the shadow of mounting economic austerity.

Political activist Blessing Adima has been vocal in her criticism of palliatives in the past. "Buying grains for distribution is a misplaced priority," she said, "it goes to show that the federal government itself does not care about food production and doesn't know how to tackle the problems that we are facing in Nigeria today. Herdsmen have chased farmers from their farmlands, and now, we import the rice that Benue State alone could have produced for Nigeria. We also import the rice that southern Kaduna, Zamfara, Ebonyi and Taraba could have made for Nigeria," she told the media in 2024.

Bags of rice. Photo credit: NurPhoto/Getty Images

In her view, the government's focus on importing rice, rather than investing in local agriculture, is evidence of a more profound indifference to the plight of Nigeria's farmers. Adima believed, like many others, that the money allocated for palliatives would be better spent tackling chronic issues like insecurity, banditry, and the erosion of local food production.

Development consultant Furoebi Akene also echoed this sentiment, urging policymakers to encourage smallholder farmers to return to their fields by providing tractors, fertilisers, and farm inputs. "The aid we see today only brings temporary reprieve," he noted, "while the system continues to channel resources into a cycle of dependency and short-term fixes."

"All efforts should be made for the farmers to return to their farms. Beyond that, how honest and patriotic are the people entrusted with distributing the rice to ensure it gets to the targeted beneficiaries? The same dubious and fraudulent characters will play out."

"Sharing billions of trailer loads of rice and distributing money as palliatives is not the solution to our food security crisis in the country. Even if it is a temporary stopgap, it must be noted that the items and monies do not even get to the end users in most cases. Corrupt government officials at the federal, state, and local government levels divert and resell the items to market vendors and make huge profits. This is the reality, and it is not good. Instead of distributing food items and money as palliatives, which corrupt government officials usually divert, the federal government should urgently declare an emergency in food security," the ex-spokesman of the Ijaw Youth Council, Ebilade Ekerefe, once said.

Palliatives in Other African Countries

Nigeria is not an isolated case in its reliance on palliative measures. Research across the African continent reveals a recurring pattern where short-term relief, though initially lauded as life-saving, ultimately failed to break the cycle of poverty and systemic neglect.

In Zimbabwe, during the hyperinflation crisis of the late 2000s, the government and international agencies rolled out food aid packages intended to stave off famine. However, studies conducted during that era estimated that as much as 65 percent of the distributed food was diverted or lost to corruption and logistical failures. This meant that, in effect, many households received less than 35 percent of the relief they were promised, leaving millions to grapple with chronic hunger even as aid continued to flow in sporadic bursts.

Kenyan and South African governments also launched a series of palliative cash transfer programs and in-kind food distributions. Even in a country with relatively better infrastructure, the palliative model in South Africa has been criticised for its inability to catalyse long-term change, instead offering a temporary band-aid that does little to offset decades of structural inequity.

The historical trajectories of Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and South Africa highlight a common negative trend: palliative measures, no matter how generous they may appear on paper, consistently fail to deliver lasting solutions.

In many parts of Nigeria, the inadequacy of food palliatives has spurred calls for a radical rethink of public policy. Instead of temporary relief measures, critics and activists advocate for a comprehensive national food policy that supports local agriculture, ensures food security, and addresses the systemic issues at the heart of Nigeria's economic crisis.

"Such policies would prioritise sustainable investments in farm inputs, modern irrigation systems, and security measures to protect farming communities from the scourge of banditry and livestock invasions. For Nigeria to move forward, it must shift its focus from distributing palliatives to cultivating long-term economic resilience," AbdulRasheed Hussaini, a public affairs analyst based in Kano, told The Liberalist.

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