

# Collaborative Public Management and the Challenge of Leadership in Nigeria's Response to Covid-19 Crisis

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**Abstract:** *One unique feature of COVID-19 pandemic is that it is creating terrifyingly pervasive social, economic, technological, political and administrative effects. This "firing-from-all-fronts" mode of attack has jolted all walks of life into instinctive reaction, thus prompting institutions and organization's into all manner of defensive responses. In this type of situation, the leadership role of the state is inexorably called into action. Spectacularly, Kogi and Cross River States had openly repudiated their governmental responsibilities for managing the pandemic thereby running into collision course with the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19. This, speak to sloppy institutional contexts for collaborative administrative response to COVID-19 crisis. Relying on the heuristic insight of the theory of structural functionalism, this paper sets out to investigate the institutional context of the apparently wobbling efforts of the Federal Government of Nigeria to forge synergistic platforms for inter-agency and inter-sectoral collaboration for tackling the incipient social challenges of COVID-19. Data for the study were drawn from participant observation and authentic secondary sources. Data were analyzed through qualitative review of literature on the subject matter. The findings indicates that within the ambient of Nigeria government, collaborative public management was not adequately implemented in managing the new normal. The study recommended among others a deliberate policy action that would ensure seem less synergy among all stakeholders in managing COVID-19 infections in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Leadership; Lockdown; Theory of Structural Functionalism; Nigeria

## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic took the world by surprise, thereby dislocating communities, disrupting social cohesion among peoples and tasking governments at all levels to innovate various measures aimed at curtailing the spread. The COVID-19 was first reported from Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province of China in December, 2019 (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020a). Initially, the perception was that the COVID-19 pandemic would be localized in Wuhan only. But the infection later spread across the world through the movement of people. The economic pain became severe as people were asked to stay at home, living under lockdown, and the severity was felt in various sectors of the economy with travel bans affecting the aviation industry, cancellations of social functions among others (Elliot, 2020).

On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization declared the disease a pandemic. Common symptoms associated by thus infections disease range from fever, cough, respiratory symptoms, shortness of breath, and breathing difficulties (WHO, 2020a). The advent of the borderless COVID-19 pandemic, shows that it is as an equal-opportunity killer, and has brought to the fore the largely ignored decades of the needs of Nigeria's citizens. Since Nigeria returned her democratic experiment, May 29, 1999, the political class has continued to face an uphill battle in building trust with the population. Earning this trust is not only crucial for the struggle against COVID-19 infections but also for Nigeria's longer-term progress and quality of leadership to address creditably yawning development gap.

COVID-19 would impose on require the Federal Government of Nigeria the urgent task for a strong institutional mechanisms for collaborative management of the crisis. To that effect, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) inaugurated 12-member Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (PTF) to coordinate and oversee Nigeria's multi-sectoral, inter-governmental efforts to contain the spread and mitigate its impact in Nigeria. In line with this development, the Federal House of Representatives equally inaugurated 18 man Ad-hoc Committee to work with the Presidential Task Force with other relevant agencies set up by the FGN to find a solution to challenges posed by the virus (Tessy, 2020). Furthermore, other state governments among which include: Enugu State Government which constituted Medical Committees on De-Escalation of COVID-19, Bauchi State Government which has State Task Force Committee on COVID-19, Kaduna State with a State Standing Committee on COVID-19 (Lawal, 2020; New Agency of Nigeria, 2020; Okwumbu, 2020).

However, on March 29th, initial four-week state-wide lockdown was declared in three major states, Lagos, Abuja and Ogun, halting all essential activities. Following this Presidential Executive Order, state governments throughout the country took stringent measures such, as restrictions on inter-state travel, instituting of curfews, etc. Unfortunately, despite having a five-month head start, and with the awareness that the nation's weak economy and health infrastructure are under the strain of a full-blown outbreak of the pandemic, Nigeria failed to prepare adequately. Rather, what has perhaps been laid bare is weak institutional framework for a quality leadership demanded by this peculiar emergency.

According to Lanre (2020), in almost every other nation affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including US, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany and even Ghana, leaders have displayed varying degrees of leadership, consistently reaching out to citizens and residents with messages of reassurance and resilience. However, this has not been the case in Nigeria. Rather than lead from the front, the Presidency had initially chosen to not lead at all and debriefing the country on where the virus stands and efforts at its control. Even when the FGN seriously acted, seem less synergy needed to get all hands on desk was fledgling. To seek explanation for this leadership problem our study strive to find out the institutional constraints to collaborative management of the social crises engendered by COVID-19 in Nigeria.

In line with the above background, the general objective of the study focuses on the constraints to bringing all relevant hands on desk and the institutional bottlenecks in the way of political leadership in Nigeria as it responds to COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, the study sought to identify the institutional capacity and specific inter-governmental hiccups in the way of collaborative management of COVID-19 crisis in Nigeria.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE AND THEORETICAL STANDPOINT

### 2.1 COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

The coronavirus infections has had significant impact on Nigerian economy which has attracted the attention of a lot of scholars. COVID-19 according to WHO (2020b), has spread to more than 200 countries including China prompting the WHO to declare the disease as a global pandemic. The study observed the implication of COVID-19 on the Nigerian economy, its disruption of activities and economy instability. Currently, the case fatality ratio of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria is 0.03 (i.e. 3% of total confirmed cases). This value is less than that calculated from the global figures (CFR = 0.06) (Ohia, Bakary and Ahmad, 2020). The actual numbers of people infected are unknown, as apparently healthy peoples are not tested unless they have a travel history to high-index countries within a stipulated time or suspected cases. Given this, the study is of the opinion that the number of infected people could be more in Nigeria. Invariably, this could lead to under reporting of COVID-19 associated deaths, as already reported in other countries (African News, 2020). Although the recorded cases and estimated mortality rate may seem low, it is important to note that Nigeria is the largest black nation with a population of 206,914,338 million people as of Friday 28 August, 2020 based on Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data (Worldometer, 2020). Furthermore, Nigeria population is equivalent to 2.64 per cent of the total world population and ranks number seven (7) in the list of dependency countries. Ajayi (2020) posits that as at 6<sup>th</sup> August 2020, the Federal Government of Nigeria extended eased lockdown by four weeks as a result of the growing wave of community transmission of COVID-19 infections. This extension of lockdown was also in connection with the incursions into 536 representing 69 per cent out of the Nigeria's 774 Local Government Areas. According to Nigeria's Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) (2022) data on COVID-19 shows that, as of Thursday 28 July 2022 at 3:13pm West Central African time Nigeria has reported a total number of 5,356,770 sampled cases, 260,764 confirmed cases, 4,025 active cases, 253,592 discharged cases and 4,025 death cases. See table 1 below:

**Table 1:** Statistics of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria as at 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2022

S/No	Active cases	Confirmed Cases	Discharged Cases	Deaths	Total Test Carried Out
1.	4,025	260,764	253,592	4,025	5,356.770

**Source:** Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) (2022)

### 2.2 Collaborative Public Management

According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) constitution, the main public sector responsibilities are split across various government levels. Thus, no single tier of government could deliver radical improvement in service delivery on its own, which means that coordination and cooperation are pre-requisite. However, the existing mechanism and institutions for intergovernmental policy coordination as it concerns the novel COVID-19 pandemic are weak. The key indication of existing bottlenecks in current coordination arrangements of COVID-19 relates to the facts that some state governors do not align with the PTF inaugurated by the presidency.

Collaborative Public management according to Agronoff and McGuire (2003) is a concept that describes the process of facilitating and operating in multi-organizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved, or solved easily, by single organizations. Collaborative in the context of the study implies working together to achieve common goals, often working across state boundaries in Nigeria. Government and the participation of citizens in the decision making process is one of the important indicators of democracies. The civic engagement in the decision making process and collaborative management of COVID-19 pandemic involving the PTF and other state Technical Committees on COVID-19 depend on the strong interdependence among various leadership. In

managing the pandemic it seems the Federal and state government have neglected the power of collaborative effort to address pressing issues on COVID-19.

### 2.3 Leadership as Index of Public Management

Leadership is another veritable tenet of collaborative public management that also appears to be of great importance to the management of COVID-19 crisis among the three tiers of government. Public leadership is conceptualised here in terms of a number of distinctive functions that need to be performed in order for a polity to govern itself effectively and democratically, but which are not performed spontaneously by a polity's public institutions, organizations and routines (John, Turner, Reynolds and Emina, 2008). According to Moghalu (2020), leadership is the ability to inspire, motivate, and mobilize a unit of human beings - family, organization, institution, state or country - to make steady and measurable progress.

Leadership in Nigeria runs on thread of mistrust between the governments and the governed, due to constant failure and disappointment of the citizenry by successive regimes, such that it has become a norm not to expect any positive change from any government. The idea of leadership in Nigeria is the opportunity or turn of a given group or section of the country to exploit the national privileges both in cash and kind. Leadership in Nigeria, to a large extent is "Pestilential" every new regime leaves the citizens worse than the previous regime. This trend is what political scientists have christened "Astigmatism". By this, they mean that "citizens are so progressively disillusioned by the poor performance of any extant regime that they openly pray and wish for a re-crudescence (or return) of the immediate past regime, which ironically had been so irretrievably disparaged. This is the true situation in Nigeria today" (Onyishi, 2020: 15).

### 3. Theoretical Standpoints

The study is guided by the theory of structural functionalism. Radchiff Brown and Malinowski, Spencer, Durkheim, Comte and Parsons are very instrumental to the theory. It fundamentally understands the society in terms of structures and its given mandates. The major concern of the proponents is how societies sustain stability and survive over a given period. They believe that societies need to be divided with equal parts held together by common symbols and shared values. They maintained that complex societies are held together by what he called organic solidarity that produces social bonds based on interdependence and specialization, which are the hallmarks among the members of developed societies.

This theory is unequivocally relevant to this study. It exemplified the importance of inclusiveness of stakeholders as panacea to smooth coordination of overall policy direction, guidance, etc to contain the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of Nigeria, both the configuration of the government and roles regarding the function of NCDC, PTF and other agencies responding to the COVID-19 crisis in achieving the yearnings and aspirations of the citizens have been largely dysfunctional as the system can no longer maintain itself. Instead of these agencies to collectively fight the virus, they have further divided the country due to its pseudo federalism as in the case of Kogi and Cross Rivers. Hence, it has led many people in doubt about the sustainability of PTF. Therefore, there is wide spread agitation for the need to collaborate among the agencies.

### 4. Materials and Methods

The study used qualitative descriptive approach. Due to safety protocols established by health experts on COVID-19 pandemic, we utilized quality data from direct observation of events, media commentaries, official documents and relevant agencies. The key agencies in this regard are: Federal Ministry of Finance (FMF) and daily updates from Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on COVID-19 cases in Nigeria. The NCDC data represents authentic national figures on total confirmed cases, total discharged, total fatalities and total number of laboratory tests carried out since the first case of the virus was recorded in Nigeria. Data for global cases were sourced from the John Hopkins University database which provides daily updates on global cases of COVID-19. Each document was skimmed for relevance and then studied in detail after being deemed to be of potential significance.

### 5. Institutional Capacity and Hiccups of Collaborative Management of COVID-19 Crisis in Nigeria

From 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2020 when the first case of the pandemic was reported in Nigeria, the Nigerian government has responded to the outbreak by involving multiple government institutions and development partners to curtailing the pandemic. Adapting and adjusting the economy was a difficult one for Nigerians. The Executive Order and general managerial style had its strengths and weakness. Its strength lies on the president's announcement of N500 billion COVID-19 crisis intervention fund, and enhanced support to states for critical healthcare expenses. The President also announced that federal government grants would be given to fight COVID-19, with NGN10 billion given to Lagos State, as it had the country's highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, and a five billion naira special intervention fund to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), for coordinating surveillance of the disease and the public health response nationwide (Alagboso and Abubakar, 2020). Among the later, the most obvious was lack of consensus among the federating Units. It was simply too much for the PTF to take on the functions of the state without putting into considerations the peculiarity of the environment. This was the root of the seeming disagreement especially between Kogi State, Cross Rivers and PTF. As a result, PTF sometimes became bogged down in day-to-day details report of the pandemic that would have been much, better left to Ad-hoc Committees at the state and local government levels.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health emergency response to the outbreak and rests with the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) under the leadership of Dr Osagie Ehanire. However, the COVID-19 response has also required a multi-stakeholder, multi-

agency collaboration as other relevant MDAs have been incorporated to contribute their expertise to the response. Other agencies of the FMOH such as the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR), National Institute for Pharmaceutical Research and Development (NIPRD), and National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) are also integral parts of the COVID-19 national response by developing and expediting processes for testing and validation of claims of pharmaceutical interventions for COVID-19.

However, in lure of the agencies, the existing collaborative processes has pose some hurdles in managing the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. For instance, in the immediate face of a surge the 36 states of the federation collaborated by institute various COVID-19 Technical Committees to ensure that government operations remained effective. These Committees provided innovative responses to the new realities on the ground. According to Chukwudi (2020), the managerial acumen of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) minister played a prominent role as he rose to the occasion, rallied all stakeholders to brace up to the challenge and provided the needed logistics support towards the realization of the presidency vision of seeing Nigeria flatten the curve in the spread of the deadly pandemic.

Besides, as the pandemic continued to increase on daily bases, the leadership of the federal capital exhibited an unmatched willingness and desire to tackle the challenge frontally. This is evidence from the administration's immediate proactive measures put in place such as closure of mass-gathering places like cinemas, churches, mosques, hotels, events centres, night clubs, conference centres and strict regulation of markets in the territory.

The administrative responses in state, local governments COVID-19 team look to PTF for direction and assistance. Although the goal is streamlined hierarchical coordination, power struggles between levels of government are in existence. Nevertheless, in the medium and long term, however, significant political conflicts emerged as there has been series of denials, accusations, and counter-accusations between state government officials and federal health authorities on whether the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) cases exist in two states of Kogi and Cross River. For instance, the study observed that Kogi State government verbal altercation between officials of NCDC which is among the 12-Member Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 saddled with the coordination to deliver on its mandate was unnecessary. Also, the Cross River state government was angered by the utterance to order the NCDC officials coming into the state to take samples to be quarantined for 14 days (Ndujihe and Ajayi, 2020). According to Adewale (2020) both states (Kogi and Cross River) have been claiming that the deadly virus has no place in their vicinity because of their proactive efforts. The position of the state governments has raised the curiosity among Nigerians on whether the claims are real or not considering what is at stake should there be any misrepresentation. To further buttress this point of collaborative process, the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) has decried the stance of the Governments of Kogi and Cross River states to NCDC guidelines on testing, warning that it could seriously imperil the whole national response to controlling COVID-19 pandemic (Onyedinefu, 2020). The implication is that apart from threats and in some instances, prevention from collecting and testing samples of suspected cases of COVID-19; the pronouncements of some political leaders constitute outright interference in NCDC's coordination of case treatment for effectiveness.

Again, the disposition from the presidency at this critical time is unpresidential and unacceptable. The government has increasingly faced complex policy challenges, in managing the existential crisis. The leadership is challenge by the needed adjustment to stabilize the economy. The president for the benefit of doubt may have had good intention, but good intentions are not enough because they could not translate these intentions into practical and tangible things by ensuring that the people suffer neither from the virus or hunger.

The PTF has not performed adequately to live up to the expectations. In fact, the consensus of opinions has it that the PTF in several cases has compromised in giving the real figure of confirmed cases. Moreover, most members of the PTF were selected through political patronage. Therefore, all the administrative leaders of PTF and Standing/ Technical Committees require radical transformation to become instrument of progress.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The study examined collaborative public management and the challenges of leadership in Nigeria's response to COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, the study concluded that a semblance of collaborative public management is in existence within the ambience of the public sector administrative system but not adequately implemented most especially in managing the new normal. Consensuses building and effective leadership as variable of collaborative public management are not only appropriate but also essential in the management of the pandemic, therefore, should be enhanced. The PTF and other Technical Committees should place full and adequate importance to quality leaders for effective collaborative public management through the involvement of relevant stakeholders to the decision making process in managing the COVID-19 crisis.

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