

Fuel Subsidy Removal and Its Effects on Inequality and Poverty in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36348/sjhss.2026.v11i06.003> | Received: 06.04.2026 | Accepted: 23.05.2026 | Published: 06.06.2026

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Abstract

Following the complete removal of fuel subsidy in 2023 by the Nigerian government, the effects are still subject of debate to both proponents and opponents of the policy. While its proponents believe it had saved huge revenue and blocked leakages in government expenditures thereby saving funds for developmental project, its opponents believe it has worsened the socioeconomic conditions of the populace through wide spread poverty and inequality in the society. The study focuses on a critical analysis of the effect of fuel subsidy removal on poverty alleviation and bridging the inequality in Nigeria. The work adopted the documentary and qualitative research design. Also, secondary sources of data were explored to generate data needed for the study and content analysis method was used to analyze the derived data. The study findings reveal that the removal of subsidy have strong effects on societal poverty and inequality in Nigeria and thus far the impact of palliative measure put in place are yet to meaningfully change the status quo. The study therefore recommends the need for the government to ensure its policy formulation and policy implementation process are well guided to address the challenges posed by the removal of fuel subsidy.

Keywords: Fuel Subsidy, Fuel Subsidy Removal, Inequality, Poverty, Subsidy.

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INTRODUCTION

Subsidy is generally an integral part of government expenditure both in developed and developing countries. Subsidies have long been employed by government worldwide to support various sectors of the economy ranging from agriculture, energy, transportation, healthcare amongst others (Ogwuche, Adejor, Naankar, Garba and Dole, 2024). Thus, subsidies are targeted at achieving various economic and social objectives by providing financial assistance to some specific and strategic industries and sectors in order to mitigate market failure. However, the efficacy and sustainability of these subsidies have come under scrutiny due to their potential distortive effects on market mechanisms and fiscal sustainability.

The 2023 removal of the subsidy in Nigeria has generated heated debate, particularly regarding its immediate effects on the most vulnerable segments of society. A major concern is the inflationary impact of higher fuel prices on food, transportation, and other essential goods. For example, the cost of transportation, which directly affects the ability of low-income workers to access jobs and markets, has skyrocketed since the

subsidy was lifted (BudGIT, 2023). Consequently, the short-term effect is likely to widen the inequality gap, as poorer households already spend a higher percentage of their income on energy-related costs compared to wealthier households.

However, proponents argue that the long-term benefits of subsidy removal could be substantial if the funds saved are reinvested in more targeted social programs. These programs could include cash transfers, investments in health and education, and infrastructure development that directly benefit the poor. If well-managed, the removal could help reduce fiscal deficits, stabilize the economy, and provide funds for development that genuinely address inequality (World Bank, 2024b). Additionally, successful examples from countries like Indonesia and India show that fuel subsidy reforms, when accompanied by adequate social protection measures, can be more effective in tackling poverty and inequality than blanket subsidies (IMF, 2024).

In this context, the decision to remove fuel subsidies presents both challenges and opportunities for

Nigeria. The effectiveness of this policy shift will largely depend on the government's ability to implement compensatory measures that protect vulnerable populations from the negative effects of rising fuel prices. While timing and sequencing of subsidy removal can significantly influence its economic and social ramifications, the gradual and well sequenced reforms are often recommended to mitigate potential adverse effects on vulnerable population and allow for the adjustment of affected sectors. Nigeria has long grappled with the issue of fuel subsidy which had imposed a significant fiscal burden on the government. While distorting market incentives and hindering economic efficiency. Despite being a major oil producing nation, Nigeria has struggled to maintain affordable fuel prices due to the reliance on fuel imports and the ineffectiveness of domestic refining capacity (World Bank Report, 2019). Also, the effectiveness of subsidy removal in Nigeria hinges on the government's ability to address underlying structural issues including inadequate infrastructure, wide spread corruption and ineffectiveness in the energy sectors (Omolara and Amoo, 2020).

It is on this premise this paper seeks to critically analyze how subsidy removal can help bridge the inequality gap and help alleviate poverty in Nigeria. The findings will provide valuable insights into the broader implications of subsidy policies in developing economies and contribute to ongoing discussions on equitable economic reforms that address the challenges of societal inequality and poverty alleviation in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria has sparked significant controversy and concern due to its profound impact on the economy and society, particularly its effect on society's inequality and poverty level. Historically, fuel subsidies were introduced as a means to reduce the cost of living for citizens by making fuel affordable. However, over the years, the subsidy system has proven to be inefficient and unsustainable, draining government resources while failing to achieve its intended objectives of reducing poverty and promoting equity.

Also there exist the identified gap in existing empirical studies on the impact of petroleum subsidy in Nigeria which revolves around the predominant use of discourse analysis and content analysis often relying on theoretical discussions and interviews with decision makers at the expense of those directly affected by these policies. The neglect of the affected masses has continued to create the incomplete debate on the true picture of inequality and poverty level occasioned by the removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria.

Research Questions

- i. How has the removal of fuel subsidies affected different socioeconomic groups, particularly low-income households, in terms of cost of living and access to essential goods and services?
- ii. What social protection and compensatory measures have been implemented by the Nigerian government to mitigate the adverse effects of fuel subsidy removal, and how effective have these measures been in reducing inequality and poverty in Nigeria?
- iii. What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of other countries that have implemented fuel subsidy reforms, and how can these lessons inform strategies to reduce inequality and poverty in our society?

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to critically analyze the effect of Fuel Subsidy Removal on inequality and poverty in Nigeria. Specific objectives include, to;

- i. Analyze the effects of fuel subsidy removal on societal inequality and poverty in Nigeria.
- ii. Evaluate the effectiveness of social protection and compensatory measures implemented by the Nigerian government in mitigating the adverse effects of fuel subsidy removal on societal inequality and poverty.
- iii. Identify lessons from the experiences of other countries that have implemented fuel subsidy reforms and to recommend strategies for reducing inequality in Nigeria based on these case studies.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The research adopted a documentary and qualitative research design enabling a through exploration of the topic. Secondary sources of data was collected from textbooks, journals, official document reports and seminar papers related to the subject matter. This approach ensures various perspectives and insights were captured. The content analysis method was used in analyzing the gathered information. This method allowed identifying key themes, patterns and meaning within the data ensuring the acquired data supports findings and conclusions that sufficiently addresses the research objective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section seeks review of previous works on the subject being studied with a view to identifying areas for further investigation. Key words related to the subject will be reviewed and related literature will also be analyzed for clarity and theme identification.

Subsidy

Also, according to Uko, Etefia and Ebong (2024), noted subsidy is financial contribution provided

by the government, state or organization to assist an industry, individual or public officials in maintaining lower prices for certain goods and services. This is intended to help address specific needs.

From the above, subsidy is a complex issue both economically and socially across the globe. As the world transitions to a more sustainable and equitable future, it is essential to carefully design and implement subsidies that support sustainable development and reduce harm to the environment. Subsidy exist in various sectors of society's economy and takes various form.

Fuel Subsidy

According to Agu; Ekwutosi and Augustine (2018), fuel subsidy is a kind of market manipulation whereby government fixes the price of the commodity below its actual market price and pay the difference to the retailers. In this case, the government decides or fix the pump price of fuel below the actual market price and the difference is paid to the importers and marketers by the government. This means fuel subsidy represent a complex and multifaceted policy instrument that cut across various economic, social and political considerations.

According to Evans, Nwaogwugwu, Vincent, Wale-Awe, Mesagan .and Ojapinwa (2023), fuel subsidies have been historically documented in Nigeria since the 1970's. They reveal that the long-standing existence was primarily to shield citizens from volatile energy cost against global oil price shocks, given that Nigeria's refineries are in a state of under-utilization despite increasing demand for energy through fuel.

From the above, fuel subsidy is grounded in the principle of market interventions and economic regulation. It reflects a deliberate policy choice by government to influence fuel prices and consumption pattern in pursuit of various socioeconomic objectives, including promoting energy affordability, supporting domestic industries, mitigating inflationary pressures and addressing socioeconomic inequality concerns.

Fuel Subsidy Removal

According to Gamette and Oteng (2024), noted that fuel subsidy removal was taking fuel pricing responsibility out of government purview. Politically, unpalatable price hikes would be perceived as outside the government jurisdiction and that future administration would be discouraged from reinstating subsidies that had been previously eliminated. The aim is to bring about transparency in the energy market in terms of pricing and competitive market outcomes.

According to Onyambayi, Aliyu, Cynthia, Yusuf and Audu (2024), fuel subsidy removal is a complex policy decision undertaken by governments to address economic, fiscal and social challenges

associated with subsidizing the cost of fuel for consumers.

From the above, fuel subsidy removal schemes are sensitive to countries economic structure, degree of development, political system and economic status. Hence the call for careful study before implementation, effective communication and high degree of trust between the citizens and the government without ignoring the cultural and social factors that may impact.

Societal Inequality

Societal inequality has been a longstanding issue with various authors and researchers weighing in on the topic. Some of the these perspective includes the Marist's school of thought that societies revolves around class systems which are based on the relationship to the means of production, dividing those who own and control productive properties from those who do not.

Also, Herold (2011), have explored the intersection of societal inequality and other forms of inequality such as racism and sexism. These intersections can exacerbate existing and new inequality discuss.

According to World Bank (2020), inequality "arises from unequal access to wealth, education, and other assets, perpetuating disparities in living standards and opportunities". Socioeconomic inequality refers to the uneven distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges among individuals and groups within a society. It encompasses disparities in income, education, healthcare, access to essential services, and overall quality of life. This inequality is often shaped by systemic factors such as social class, economic policies, and historical inequities.

Imogen (2019), relates inequality to disparities that individuals might have in both their socioeconomic and social resources that are limited to their social class. These disparities include but are not limited to their earnings, education and income.

From the above, societal inequality occurs when resources within a society are distributed unevenly distributed often as a result of inequitable allocation practices that create distinct unequal patterns based on socially defined categories of people. The differences in accessing social goods within society are influenced by factors like power, religion, kinship, prestige, race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, intelligence and class. Socioeconomic inequality usually implies the lack of equity of outcome but may alternatively be conceptualized as a lack of equality in access to opportunity. Overall socioeconomic inequality is a complex issue with multiple factors at play. Understanding these factors and their intersections is

crucial for developing effective solutions to addressing inequality issues in the society.

Fuel Subsidy removal and poverty Issues in Nigeria

Since the removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria, there have been increase poverty rate across the federation. The increasing agitation amongst the youth and high-level insecurity points to these realities. According to Ozil and Obiora (2023), at the individual level, the removal of fuel subsidy have led to fewer disposable income, fewer food in the land and fewer medicine for the sick as well as inability to afford basic education in several parts of the country. More families may go hungry; more children will go hungry and more parents will be worried at their children despair. The poor and middle-class consumers will witness a fall in their purchasing power and reduced sales volumes. And if they attempt to pass on the cost to consumers, consumers' might refuse to buy or they will reduce the quantity purchased, thereby leading to low business patronage.

Gap in knowledge

The core problem this research aims to address is whether the removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria has a net effect on societal inequality and poverty state of the citizenry of Nigeria. Also, does this policy reform exacerbate inequality by disproportionately burdening the poor, or does it offer an opportunity to reallocate resources more effectively and equitably? Moreover, the study will investigate the adequacy of compensatory measures, such as social welfare programs, aimed at cushioning the adverse impacts on lower-income groups.

This research seeks to fill that gap by examining how the policy impacts various demographic groups, with a particular focus on the poor and vulnerable, and exploring potential strategies to mitigate negative outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Neo-liberal Economic Theory emphasizes free-market capitalism, minimal government intervention, and the primacy of individual enterprise in driving economic growth and societal progress. Rooted in classical liberalism, it advocates for policies that promote privatization, deregulation, free trade, and fiscal austerity. This theory emerged prominently in the late 20th century as a response to perceived inefficiencies of state-controlled economies and was championed by economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. They argued that markets, when left to operate without significant government interference, are the most efficient mechanisms for allocating resources, fostering innovation, and driving economic development (Hayek, 1944; Friedman, 1962). Friedrich Hayek's work, particularly in *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), warned against excessive state control, suggesting that central planning leads to inefficiencies, stifles individual

freedoms, and paves the way for authoritarianism. Milton Friedman expanded on these ideas in *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), where he advocated for policies such as the deregulation of industries, floating exchange rates, and monetarist approaches to controlling inflation. Neo-liberalism gained traction globally during the 1980s, with leaders like Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States implementing policies that embodied its principles.

Core features of Neo-liberal Economic Theory include the prioritization of market mechanisms over state intervention. It posits that governments should focus on creating an environment conducive to free enterprise rather than directly managing the economy. This is achieved through policies like reducing trade barriers, encouraging competition, and privatizing public assets (Friedman, 1962). Another key feature is the emphasis on fiscal discipline, which advocates for reducing government spending and deficits to ensure economic stability. Proponents argue that limiting government borrowing prevents inflation and encourages private sector investment.

Neo-liberalism also stresses individual responsibility and self-reliance, often linking economic success to personal effort rather than structural factors. While this approach incentivizes productivity and innovation, critics argue that it can exacerbate inequality and neglect the needs of vulnerable populations (Harvey, 2005). In developing countries, neo-liberal policies have often been implemented through structural adjustment programs mandated by institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which condition financial assistance on the adoption of market-oriented reforms. These programs have sparked debates over their social and economic impacts, particularly in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (Stiglitz, 2002).

Neo-liberal Economic Theory remains influential in shaping global economic policies, though it has faced criticism for its role in widening inequality and undermining public welfare systems. Its proponents, however, continue to argue that free markets are essential for fostering long-term economic growth and innovation.

Evaluation of Research Question Raised.

i. How has the removal of fuel subsidies affected different socioeconomic groups, particularly low-income households, in terms of cost of living and access to essential goods and services?

The removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria is a transformative policy shift with profound implications for various socioeconomic groups, particularly low-income households. As a measure aimed at reducing government expenditure and promoting fiscal stability, The policy disproportionately impacts low-income households, which are more vulnerable to rising prices

and have limited capacity to adapt to economic shocks. Examining these impacts in detail provides a nuanced understanding of how subsidy removal reshapes the socioeconomic landscape in Nigeria.

For low-income households, the immediate effect of fuel subsidy removal is a substantial increase in the cost of living. Fuel prices serve as a critical input for transportation, energy, and production costs, which cascade into higher prices for food, housing, and other essential goods and services. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023), the inflation rate in Nigeria surged by over 80% in the months following the removal of fuel subsidies. This rise disproportionately affects poor households, which spend a larger share of their income on necessities such as food and transportation. For instance, a typical low-income family's daily commute becomes significantly more expensive, forcing them to allocate a greater portion of their limited income to transportation at the expense of other critical needs.

On food, Abokhe (2024), highlights that food expenditures among low-income households increased by seventy-five percent (75%) on average after subsidy removal, leading to reduced dietary quality and heightened malnutrition risks, especially among children and pregnant women.

In contrast, middle- and upper-income groups are relatively better positioned to absorb the economic shocks associated with subsidy removal. These groups typically have more diversified income sources and greater access to financial resources, enabling them to maintain their standard of living despite rising costs. Moreover, wealthier households are more likely to own private vehicles and benefit from economies of scale in fuel consumption, mitigating the overall impact on their budgets. However, even for these groups, the broader economic consequences of subsidy removal, such as inflation and reduced purchasing power, are not negligible.

The policy leads to higher living costs, reduced access to essential goods and services, and heightened economic vulnerabilities for the poor. While middle- and upper-income groups are better equipped to adapt, the broader economic challenges remain significant. To mitigate these impacts and promote inclusive development, the government must prioritize the reinvestment of subsidy savings into social programs, infrastructure, and targeted support for vulnerable populations. Transparent governance and effective policy implementation are essential to ensuring that the long-term benefits of subsidy removal outweigh its immediate costs.

ii. What social protection and compensatory measures have been implemented by the Nigerian government to mitigate the adverse effects of fuel subsidy removal, and how effective have these measures been in reducing inequality and poverty in Nigeria?

The removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria has posed significant challenges, particularly for vulnerable populations who bear the brunt of the resulting economic pressures. Recognizing the potential for heightened poverty and inequality, the Nigerian government has implemented various social protection and compensatory measures to cushion the adverse effects. These initiatives aim to address immediate hardships while fostering long-term economic resilience. However, the effectiveness of these measures in mitigating inequality remains a topic of critical analysis, as their success depends on design, implementation, and inclusivity.

One of the primary compensatory measures introduced by the Nigerian government is the establishment of conditional cash transfer programs. These programs aim to provide financial assistance to low-income households, helping them cope with rising costs of living due to higher fuel prices. According to the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs (2023), over one million households have benefitted from direct cash transfers since the removal of subsidies. While these payments have offered temporary relief, critics argue that the amounts disbursed are often insufficient to cover the broader inflationary impacts on essential goods and services. Also, the student loan fund known as National Education Loan Fund (NELFUND). Moreover, the targeting mechanisms for identifying eligible beneficiaries have been called into question, with reports of inefficiencies and political interference undermining the program's reach and effectiveness (Transparency International, 2022).

In addition to cash transfers, the government has also introduced Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) buses for public transportation as a means of alleviating the burden of rising transportation costs. Public transport systems, particularly in urban areas, are a critical lifeline for low-income workers. By reducing fares through government intervention, this measure aims to provide alternative sources of fuel and ensure continued access to employment opportunities and essential services. (Adesina, 2023).

The government has also attempted to mitigate the effects of subsidy removal through broader social investment programs, including skills training and job creation initiatives. These programs aim to build long-term resilience by equipping individuals with the skills and resources needed to adapt to the evolving economic landscape. For instance, the Nigeria Youth Employment Action Plan (NYEAP) has focused on empowering

young people through vocational training and entrepreneurship support. While these initiatives are commendable, their impact has been constrained by limited funding, inadequate coordination, and a lack of alignment with labor market demands (World Bank, 2023). Furthermore, the benefits of such programs often take years to materialize, offering little immediate relief to those most affected by subsidy removal.

Despite these efforts, the overall effectiveness of the compensatory and social protection measures in mitigating inequality remains a subject of debate. One major limitation is the lack of transparency and accountability in the management of funds saved from subsidy removal. Public confidence in the government's ability to effectively reinvest these funds into compensatory and social programs has been eroded by a history of corruption and mismanagement. For example, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023) reports that only a fraction of the projected savings from subsidy removal has been allocated to compensatory and social protection initiatives, raising questions about the government's commitment to addressing inequality and poverty in Nigeria.

iii. What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of other countries that have implemented fuel subsidy reforms, and how can these lessons inform strategies to reduce inequality and poverty in our society?

By examining the approaches adopted by countries such as Indonesia, Iran, and Ghana, policymakers can better understand the strategies that have worked, the pitfalls to avoid, and the importance of context-specific solutions.

Indonesia's experience with fuel subsidy reform illustrates the importance of gradual implementation and effective communication. Over the years, the Indonesian government has attempted several rounds of subsidy reduction, each with varying degrees of success. In 2014, Indonesia undertook one of its most comprehensive reforms by raising fuel prices and subsequently eliminating gasoline subsidies entirely in 2015. To cushion the impact on vulnerable populations, the government expanded its social protection programs, including cash transfers, education subsidies, and healthcare initiatives (Beaton and Lontoh, 2016). Public communication played a critical role in garnering support for these reforms, with the government emphasizing the inefficiencies and inequities of subsidies, which disproportionately benefited higher-income households. While the reforms initially led to inflationary pressures, the gradual implementation and targeted compensatory measures helped mitigate social unrest and ensured broader public acceptance.

Iran's fuel subsidy reform, implemented in 2010, is another instructive case. Faced with unsustainable subsidy costs that accounted for a

significant portion of its GDP, Iran introduced a plan to phase out subsidies on energy and fuel. The government implemented a universal cash transfer program to compensate citizens for the resulting price increases, providing payments equivalent to approximately 29% of the median household income (Guillaume, Zytek, and Farzin, 2011). This approach ensured that the compensation reached a wide segment of the population, reducing the risk of inequity. However, Iran's experience also highlights the importance of addressing macroeconomic stability. The lack of a comprehensive strategy to control inflation undermined the effectiveness of the cash transfers, as rising prices eroded their real value over time. This underscores the need for robust monetary and fiscal policies to complement subsidy reforms.

Ghana's efforts at removing subsidy gain public support, when the government redirected savings from subsidy reductions into visible development projects, such as infrastructure improvements and education funding (Coady, Flamini and Sears, 2015). Despite these efforts, Ghana's experience underscores the challenges of sustaining reforms in the face of political pressures and external economic shocks, such as fluctuations in global oil prices. The frequent reversals of subsidy policies in Ghana highlight the importance of strong political will and consistent policy implementation. These cases highlight the effectiveness of combining gradualism with targeted social interventions and investments in complementary infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

The removal of fuel subsidies has been a critical policy intervention in many countries, often undertaken to address fiscal imbalances, reduce market distortions, and promote sustainable economic practices. However, this policy has significant implications for inequality and poverty reduction, particularly in developing nations like Nigeria. The elimination of subsidies directly impacts living costs, such as transportation, goods, and services, and has far-reaching consequences for income distribution that supports inequality and poverty level. Understanding this nexus is crucial for designing policies that mitigate the adverse effects of subsidy removal while promoting equitable economic development.

Recommendations

The study therefore recommended that Nigerian government should prioritize the welfare and well-being of the citizens mostly the vulnerable through policy formulation and guided implementation that avail them opportunity to meet basic needs as a sure way of alleviating poverty and reducing the inequality gap.

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