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Economic Hardship and Democratic Disillusionment in Nigeria: Imperatives for Legislative Action

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Executive Summary

Nigeria is facing a dual crisis of economic hardship and growing democratic disillusionment. Persistent inflation, high unemployment, declining purchasing power, rising food insecurity, and widening inequality have placed severe pressure on households and businesses. Recent economic reforms, though aimed at long-term stabilization, have intensified short-term socio-economic strain, particularly among vulnerable populations and the youth. As economic hardship deepens, public trust in democratic institutions is eroding. Indicators such as voter apathy, increased protest activity, declining confidence in elected officials, and heightened social tensions suggest a widening gap between citizens and the state. When citizens perceive that democratic governance fails to deliver economic security or social justice, the legitimacy of democratic institutions weakens, posing risks to political stability and national cohesion.

The current context, therefore, presents both a challenge and an opportunity, a challenge because economic hardship risks undermining democratic consolidation; and an opportunity because decisive legislative action can restore public confidence, promote inclusive growth, and strengthen Nigeria's democratic resilience. If not urgently addressed, the convergence of economic distress and political alienation poses risks to democratic stability, national security, and social cohesion. This policy brief calls on the National Assembly to take proactive legislative measures to stabilize the economy, strengthen social protection systems, enhance institutional accountability, and restore public confidence in democratic governance. The brief therefore recommend that the national assembly may kindly:

i. Strengthen budget oversight and monitoring of the operations of the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management and related MDAs through the Senate and House committees on youth development and poverty alleviation to ensure proper use of funds for poverty alleviation and youth employment in Nigeria.
ii. Ensure that the Senate and House Committees on Poverty Alleviation effectively monitor the socio-economic consequences of major reforms through relevant MDAs and propose corrective measures.
iii. Institutionalize *citizen engagement mechanisms*, mandate periodic public hearings, and constituency-level consultations on economic policies.
iv. Promote Inclusive Economic Legislation. Support bills that encourage agro-industrial expansion, local manufacturing, digital economy development, and access to credit for SMEs. Easing of import restrictions on food items plays a significant role in the declining fortunes of local farmers. Thus, this policy of government should be rescinded.

1. Background

Nigeria is currently experiencing severe economic hardship characterized by rising inflation, unemployment, currency instability, food insecurity, and declining purchasing power. [1]These conditions have deepened citizens' frustration and contributed to growing democratic disillusionment, reflected in voter apathy, declining trust in institutions, youth unrest, and increased protest movements. At the same time, unemployment and underemployment, especially among youth, continue to be persistently high. Nigeria's large youth demographic, which could be an advantage, has instead become more vulnerable to economic exclusion. The economy's failure to create enough quality jobs has deepened frustration and social anxiety.

Historically,[2] economic hardship has had direct implications for political stability and democratic trust in Nigeria. Periods of economic downturn have often coincided with increased public dissatisfaction, protest movements, and declining voter participation. In recent electoral cycles, voter turnout has reflected growing apathy and skepticism about the responsiveness of democratic institutions.

Furthermore, the immediate consequences have been severe for ordinary citizens. Inflationary pressures have driven up the cost of food, transportation, housing, and basic services. The depreciation of the naira has increased the cost of imported goods and production inputs, further straining businesses and households. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which form the backbone of Nigeria's informal and formal economy, are facing rising operating costs and reduced consumer purchasing power.

Nigeria's current socio-political climate is shaped by the intersection of economic restructuring and challenges in democratic governance.[3] In recent years, the country has implemented significant macroeconomic reforms, including the removal of fuel subsidies, the liberalization of the foreign exchange market, and fiscal consolidation measures. These reforms were designed to address structural inefficiencies, reduce fiscal deficits, and improve long-term economic sustainability.

The National Assembly, as a representative body, plays a critical role in mediating the relationship between economic policy and democratic legitimacy. Through legislation, budgetary oversight, and constituency representation, the legislature is uniquely positioned to address the socio-economic drivers of political disillusionment.

2. How Economic Hardship Contributes to Democratic Disillusionment

[1] Steimer, S. (2025). Economic inequality leads to democratic erosion, study finds. Retrieved from: https://news.uchicago.edu/story/economic-inequality-leads-democratic-erosion-study-finds

[2] Chatham House (2022). Vote-selling behaviour and democratic dissatisfaction in Nigeria. Retrieved from: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/vote-selling-behaviour-and-democratic-dissatisfaction-nigeria/research-findings

[3] Onuoha, A. Omotayo, B. Omoyeni, T. (2025). The Casualties of Greed: Governance Crises, Development Stagnation, and the Quest for Institutional Reforms in Nigeria. Kashere journal of politics and international relations vol. 3. Retrieved from: file:///C:/Users/Samudofa/Downloads/DEC+2025+04.pdf

Economic hardship can erode confidence in democratic systems when citizens perceive that institutions are unable or unwilling to address their material needs. [4]Economic hardship often reduces the time, resources, and motivation for political engagement. Individuals struggling to meet basic needs may disengage from voting, public consultations, or community involvement, weakening participatory democracy.

Economic hardship does not automatically undermine democracy. However, when institutions fail to deliver visible, equitable, and timely responses, hardship can turn into democratic disillusionment. The critical factor is not only economic conditions themselves but also whether democratic governance demonstrates responsiveness, fairness, and accountability in addressing them. For instance, when unemployment rises, wages stagnate, or living costs outpace incomes, citizens expect elected leaders to respond. If policy solutions appear slow, ineffective, or biased toward elites, people may conclude that democratic institutions do not represent their interests. This perception erodes legitimacy.

3. Issues

Rising economic hardship marked by income inequality, job insecurity, inflationary pressures, and limited social mobility is contributing to declining public trust in democratic institutions. Many citizens perceive political systems as unresponsive to their material needs, leading to increased dissatisfaction, polarization, and support for anti-establishment movements.

Economic shocks, technological disruption, globalization, and uneven regional development have intensified financial strain for large segments of the population. For instance, when legislatures fail to address these pressures effectively or transparently, public confidence in governance erodes.

The National Assembly, as the primary lawmaking and oversight body, has a constitutional responsibility to respond decisively. Legislative intervention is critical to cushion the impact of economic reforms, strengthen social protection systems, enhance transparency and accountability, and promote inclusive economic growth. Failure to act may further entrench poverty, fuel unrest, and undermine democratic consolidation.

4. Areas for Legislative Intervention

To restore public trust and strengthen democratic legitimacy, legislative responses may kindly combine immediate economic relief with long-term institutional reform. To have it done, the legislative arm may kindly:

i. Strengthen budget oversight and monitoring of the operations of the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management and related MDAs through the Senate and House

[4] Stokes, S. (2025). Income inequality has led to an erosion of democracy in countries around the world. Retrieved from: https://socialsciences.uchicago.edu/news/income-inequality-has-led-erosion-democracy-countries-around-world

committees on youth development and poverty alleviation to ensure proper use of funds for poverty alleviation and youth employment in Nigeria.

ii. Ensure that the Senate and House Committees on Poverty Alleviation effectively monitor the socio-economic consequences of major reforms through relevant MDAs and propose corrective measures.
iii. Institutionalize citizen engagement mechanisms, mandate periodic public hearings, and constituency-level consultations on economic policies.
iv. Promote Inclusive Economic Legislation. Support bills that encourage agro-industrial expansion, local manufacturing, digital economy development, and access to credit for SMEs. Easing of import restrictions on food items plays a significant role in the declining fortunes of local farmers. Thus, this policy of government should be rescinded.

5. Conclusion

Economic hardship, if left unaddressed, can undermine democratic legitimacy. Legislative bodies play a central role in restoring trust by delivering policies that promote fairness, stability, and opportunity. Sustainable democratic governance depends not only on procedural integrity but also on the capacity to meet citizens' material needs effectively and equitably.

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