

## NILDS Issue Brief, February, 2021

### Public Trust and the Management of COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of the Legislature

<i>For: Senate Committees on Health; For: Senate Committees on Information and National Orientation.</i>	<i>For: House Committee on Health; For: Senate Committees on Information and National Orientation.</i>	<i>For: Ministries of Health; Information and Culture; National Orientation Agency; and National Centre for Diseases Control (NCDC).</i>
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#### Executive Summary

Government’s ability to harness public trust is crucial for managing the COVID-19 pandemic and resolving the crisis. This brief takes a look at what drives the widespread skepticism about government’s coronavirus response and messaging in Nigeria. More than one hundred and nine million confirmed cases of COVID-19 with about two million, four hundred and thirteen thousand nine hundred and twelve (2,413,912) deaths and still counting have been reported from 191 countries and regions of the world, as the figure spiral every day<sup>1</sup>. As the world contends with this health crisis, the yawning gap in trust and accountability between Nigerians and the Nigerian state have undermined the efforts of the government to mitigate the spread of the pandemic in the country. Many citizens consider the pandemic a hoax, some describing it as a ‘rich man’s disease’, while others see it as another conspiracy by politicians to loot the treasury. During the height of the pandemic, Nigerians are consistently playing 5-aside football, going to clubs, congregating for worship, doing businesses in the markets and elsewhere with little or no adherence to the NCDC Protocols.

At the initial, Nigerians questioned the governance of the various donations and palliative programmes of the federal government. Many seek for transparent account of how the funds and other materials donated by Nigerians, corporate organisations and the international community have been utilised by the State and its agencies. Unfortunately, scandalous looting of palliatives stockpiled by various State governments during the #EndSars protest fueled the distrust and allegations of mismanagement and misappropriation. Citizens’ trust in the affairs of the state has remained a major setback in the state management of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as reviewed. Essentially, the pandemic and its management by the machineries of the state dusted decades of public trust questions on the handlers of state institutions.

To bridge the gap on such breach of trust, the legislature as the major representative of the citizen has a critical role to play. Therefore, as the country expects the Vaccine by the end of February, 2021, there is an urgent need to manage the crises of citizens-state trust issue using the actions of the legislature as recommended below:

<sup>1</sup> WHO (2021). WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. Data last updated: 2021/2/17, 5:56pm CET. Retrieved from [https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAiAi\\_D\\_BRApEiwASslbJy198j\\_WYWDP9wTJ6PL6oDIMzIF1fPhhKJ15v4feoBjId2CFCpXj8BoCng8QAvD\\_BwE](https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAiAi_D_BRApEiwASslbJy198j_WYWDP9wTJ6PL6oDIMzIF1fPhhKJ15v4feoBjId2CFCpXj8BoCng8QAvD_BwE)

- a) National Assembly should embark on intensive review and interrogation of the processes of the management of the COVID-19 in 2020;
- b) National Assembly should also make use of the planned Vaccination to build trust in government;
- c) Open government approaches are key and an important instrument in empowering citizens and building citizens' trust. Legislature should set every apparatus in activating insightful and open oversight activities that would boost public trust among the citizens;
- d) Ministry of Information and Culture; and National Orientation Agency (NOA) has a lot of work to do as necessary information and procedures on all aspects of governance should be known and understood in both urban and rural areas; therefore, special funds should be earmarked for adequate orientation programme.
- e) The use of bottom-up approach in legislative oversight function can be used build public trust in the process;
- f) Consistent engagements of the citizens and call to action through legislative activities are also an important way to build the trust among the citizens;
- g) Legislature should empower citizens' voice in policy making by adopting Bottom-Up Model in policy formulation and implementation. This strategy will serve as an instrument to draw citizens closer to the governance cycle where citizens will take the ownership of the policy and the project. This will also help in building the public trust in the government;
- h) Legislature is a symbol of democracy and should represent the interests of the citizens in this critical period of the global pandemic. It's an avenue for civic engagement in finding solution to the general problem.

## **Introduction**

With reports of more than one -hundred and nine million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and about two million, four hundred and thirteen thousand nine hundred and twelve (2,413,9121,928,000) deaths, and still counting, in 191 countries, the world is in the grip of a major health emergency.<sup>2</sup> However, to worsen the case, the State management of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted decades of public trust questions, as it relates to governance of state institutions in Nigeria. There is a yawning gap in trust and accountability between citizens and the state in Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> This sense of mistrust in government institutions and its officials is informed by public perception that the running of the state and management of state institutions and agencies is opaque. Indeed, there are evidence-based statements that affirmed that management of the state in Nigeria is synonymous with inadequate experts, corruption, and lack of transparency, accountability and fiscal indiscipline<sup>4</sup>. This perception is not helped by numerous media reports of mindboggling acts of mismanagement and misappropriation of state resource traceable to leadership and institutional corruption. These have increased public mistrust in the political and bureaucratic leadership and by extension, the current government efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> WHO (2021). WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. Data last updated: 2021/2/17, 5:56pm CET.

Retrieved from [https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAiAi\\_D\\_BRApEiwASslbJy198j\\_WYWDPf9wTJ6PL6oDIMzIF1fPhhKJ5v4feoBjId2CFCpXj8BoCng8QAvD\\_BwE](https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAiAi_D_BRApEiwASslbJy198j_WYWDPf9wTJ6PL6oDIMzIF1fPhhKJ5v4feoBjId2CFCpXj8BoCng8QAvD_BwE)

<sup>3</sup> Donnelly, E. and Hassan, I. (2020). Nigeria's Political Leaders Need to Win Trust to Tackle COVID-19. *CHATHAM HOUSE*. Available on <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/nigeria-s-political-leaders-need-win-trust-tackle-covid-19>. And Saka, L. (2020). Virulent Virus and Public Mistrust: The Nigerian State and the Management of COVID-19 Pandemic. *360 Vibes*. Available on <https://360vibez.com.ng/virulent-virus-and-public-mistrust-the-nigerian-state-and-the-management-of-covid-19-pandemic-by-dr-luqman-saka/>. Retrieved on 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Adeyemi, O.O., Akindele, S.T., Aluko, O.A. and Agesin, B. (2012). Institutionalizing the Culture of Accountability in local Government Administration in Nigeria. *Political Science and International Relations*, Vol. 6(4), pp. 81-91; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Country Office Nigeria (2016). *Bibliography of Corruption in Nigeria*. Abuja: United Nations; and Uzor, E. (2017). *Reducing Incentives for Fiscal Indiscipline at Nigeria's Subnational Government Level*. Available on <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2017/01/16/reducing-incentives-for-fiscal-indiscipline-at-nigerias-subnational-government-level/>. Retrieved on 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2020.

The consequences of increasing public mistrust have greatly undermined the state performance and efforts in the ongoing crises in Nigeria. This has greatly diminished the capacity and capability of the state to mount effective response, and be proactive in responding to the outbreak of emergencies. The cocktails of a state with trust issue becomes problematic when the state needs the support and backing of the public for carrying through a public policy especially in relations to crisis management. This has clearly played out in the public perception of the nation's war against corruption, the fight against insurgency in the Northeast and importantly in the ongoing management of the COVID-19 health pandemic. The depth of level of public mistrust in the Nigerian state, its officials and governance process are manifested in the way and manner Nigerians have reacted to and given support to State efforts in the management of COVID-19.<sup>5</sup>

As the world contends with the fear and fatalities of COVID-19 pandemic, Nigerians are consistently playing 5-aside football, going to clubs, worshipping in congregation, carrying passengers in public transport with little or no adherence to safety protocols, doing businesses in the markets and elsewhere. In fact, some in hundreds burnt down police stations over closure of state borders, suspension of large gatherings, Friday congregational prayer and Church services.<sup>6</sup> Also, no fewer than 243 persons were arrested at Lagos nightclubs by police operatives in the state for violating COVID-19 protocols on Saturday, January 9, 2021.<sup>7</sup> A major driver is that the social contract between the Nigerian government and her citizens only seems to come into existence during elections, causing a lack of trust in the government, and widespread skepticism about its coronavirus messaging.<sup>8</sup>

Aside these, some Nigerians across the states of the federation have staged street protests to denounce the lockdown and other measures of the Federal Government to curtail the spread of the pandemic, while there have been reported incidences of attacks on security agencies and their personnel.<sup>9</sup> These incidences eventually forced the Nigerian government to announce the ease of the lockdown policy despite the continuous increase in the number of confirmed cases across the country.

Nigerians have expressed total mistrust in the managers of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, claiming there is no transparency and accountability in the management of the pandemic<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, there are insinuations and claims that the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), the Federal government's Presidential Task Force, PTF and the State governments have turned Covid19 health crisis into avenue for malfeasance and corrupt enrichment<sup>11</sup>. Many Nigerians have questioned the

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<sup>5</sup> Saka, (2020), Op Cit.

<sup>6</sup> The Vanguard Newspaper Reports (2020). COVID-19: One dies, 90 arrested in Katsina for burning police station. *Vanguard Newspaper*. Available on <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/03/covid-19-one-dies-90-arrested-in-katsina-for-burning-police-station/>. Retrieved on 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Wahab, B. (2021). 243 arrested at Lagos nightclubs for violating COVID-19 protocols. Available on [https://www.pulse.ng/news/local/243-arrested-at-lagos-nightclubs-for-violating-covid-19-protocols/7q1nre?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=daily-2021-01-11](https://www.pulse.ng/news/local/243-arrested-at-lagos-nightclubs-for-violating-covid-19-protocols/7q1nre?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=daily-2021-01-11) Retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2021

<sup>8</sup> Mbamalu, S. (2020). In Lagos, the Masks are Gone and so is Trust in Government. Retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2021 from <https://ng.boell.org/en/2020/09/22/lagos-masks-are-gone-and-so-trust-government>

<sup>9</sup> Adejumo, K. Lagos protesters kick against coronavirus lockdown, attack police officers. *Premium Times Online Newspaper*. Available on <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-west/390093-lagos-protesters-kick-against-coronavirus-lockdown-attack-police-officers.html>. Retrieved 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Saka, L. (2020), Op Cit.

<sup>11</sup> Donnelly and Hassan, 2020, *ibid*.

governance of the palliative programme of the federal government<sup>12</sup> and seeks for transparent account on how the funds donated by Nigerians and corporate organisations have been utilized by the State and its agencies. All these are strong indication of the abysmal state of trust between the government and the governed.

### **Understanding the Causes of Citizens' Distrust in Government and its Efforts in Managing the Pandemic**

As the world contends with this health crisis, the yawning gap in trust and accountability between Nigerians and the Nigerian state have made mockery of the efforts of the government to mitigate the spread of the pandemic in the country. It has been noted that many Nigerians considered the pandemic a hoax, some describing it as a 'rich man's disease', while others see it as another conspiracy by politicians to loot the treasury.<sup>13</sup>

Public trust and effective leadership could have been a vital instrument to build confidence and aid the management of the pandemic; however, these ingredients for successful crisis management are in short supply in Nigeria; perhaps due to decades of non-performance of government institutions. Therefore, in the COVID-19 crisis, the following highlighted issues contributed adversely to the citizens' trust of State efforts in managing the effects, including fatalities, of COVID-19 in Nigeria:

- i. At the initial, citizens lacked adequate understanding of the virus and its pandemic character. This was supposed to be midwived by the Ministry of Information and Culture, and importantly, National Orientation Agency (NOA);
- ii. The noticeable mishandling of the issue and government reluctance to close national borders, and airspace;
- iii. Secrecy or lack of transparency in the number of cases treated;
- iv. Lack of accountability and transparency in the management of public funds, especially donations from Nigerians, corporate world, and international communities;
- v. Scandals that have marred the administration of government palliative programmes, and subsequent allegation of hoarding and citizens looting activities;
- vi. Inadequate briefing by the Federal government, especially the President, at the early stage of the pandemic;
- vii. Announcement of the economy lockdown with no strategy to manage citizens welfare, especially the informal sector;
- viii. Propagation of conspiracy theories by influential Nigerians and religious leaders also helped to raise questions on the integrity and sincerity of the government in the management of Covid19 pandemic.

While Nigeria have recorded over one hundred and forty eight thousand five hundred (148,500) confirmed cases and one thousand seven hundred and seventy-nine (1,779) deaths have been recorded across the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory as at February 17<sup>th</sup> 2021, yet, most Nigerians are still doubting the existence of COVID-19 while going about their daily activities; they disregarded government directives, especially lockdown and preventive measures with total disdain. The increasing numbers of confirmed cases even during the total lockdown was an indication that Nigerians were not adhering to the directives of health experts. If Nigerians were complying, how has the number continued to increase, with indications pointing to mass and community spreading? Nigeria is

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<sup>12</sup> ActionAid Nigeria (2020). Press Release: COVID-19: Publish list of palliative beneficiaries, anti-corruption groups urge government. *ActionAid Nigeria*. Available on <https://nigeria.actionaid.org/news/2020/press-release-covid-19-publish-list-palliative-beneficiaries-anti-corruption-groups-urge>. Retrieved on 27<sup>th</sup> December, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Donnelly & Hassan, (2020). Op. Cit.

expected to receive an initial 16 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines through the Vaccines Global Access Facility, COVAX, by the end of February.<sup>14</sup> Also, according to Nigeria's Health Minister, Osagie Ehanire, the country has been allocated an additional 1.4 million doses of the approved Oxford- AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines, which are part of the 7 million doses donated to African States by MTN.<sup>15</sup>

Nigerians have a crisis of mistrust of the state and this can be said to have informed the disdain with which they treated government messages on COVID-19 and the willful disregards of health experts' directives issued by Nigeria Centre for Diseases Control, NCDC.<sup>16</sup> The mistrust is informed by the crisis of accountability, transparency and prudence that characterized the nation's governance process and state management.<sup>17</sup> The combinations of these factors (or toxin) had worked to reinforce the negativity that characterized the manner with which Nigerians see and take the state. The consequences being the undermining of the State especially as it relates to the management of Covid-19 health emergency. It is these challenges, as identified, that this brief seeks to address through legislators and legislative instruments in order to start managing the trust issues between the government and the citizens.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations for Legislative Intervention**

The management of the Covid-19 emergency/pandemic in 2020 by the Nigerian government raised several questions on the status of citizens' trust on the activities of the state. It is understandable that the effects of institutional malfunctioning and corruption over the years contributed to the issue of citizens' distrust in government and its health agencies. This, in turn, is affecting the formulation and implementation of appropriate health-related legislations and health policies. Also, low civic engagement between the government and the citizens has contributed adversely to the issue of public distrust in government response to COVID-19. The negative perception of the State and the struggle for citizens' trust in the public affairs especially during this period of COVID-19 pandemic, show that public administration does not function well. As the world is nursing the fear and fatalities of COVID-19 pandemic, government's ability to harness public trust is crucial for managing the pandemic and finding ways out of the global health emergency. Also, as the administration of the vaccine is coming closer, the call to manage such trust, in order to experience stress free activities, is very key and thus, should be properly managed by the legislature through its oversight and legislative functions. Lastly, as the country expects the Vaccine by the end of February 2021, there is an urgent need to manage the crises of citizens-state trust issue using the actions of the legislature as recommended below:

- a) National and State Assemblies should embark on intensive review and interrogation of the processes of the management of the COVID-19 in 2020 and the procedure of Vaccine Administration expected to start in early March, 2021;
- b) Open government approaches are key an important instrument in empowering citizens and building citizens' trust. Legislature should set every apparatus in activating insightful and open oversight activities that will include some important groups among the citizens;
- c) Ministry of Information and Culture; and National Orientation Agency (NOA) has a lot of works to do as necessary information and procedures on all aspects of governance should be known and understand in both urban and rural areas;

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<sup>14</sup> Adebowale, N. (2021). Nigeria to receive additional 1.4 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines – Minister. Retrieved from <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/health/health-news/443077-nigeria-to-receive-additional-1-4-million-doses-of-covid-19-vaccines-minister.html> on 17th February, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Mbamalu, S. (2020). Op. Cit.

<sup>17</sup> Mbamalu, S. (2020). Op. Cit.

- d) Because there is a direct link between parliamentary openness and public trust in parliament, therefore, the legislative oversight on distribution and allocation of COVID-19 Vaccines should be done transparently to inject citizens' trust in the process;
- e) Consistent engagements and call to action through legislature are also important ways to build the trust among the citizens;
- f) Legislature should empower citizens' voice in policy making by adopting Bottom-Up Model in policy formulation and implementation. This strategy will serve as an instrument to draw citizens closer to the governance cycle where citizens will take the ownership of the policy and the project. This will also help in building public trust in the government;
- g) Legislature is a symbol of democracy and should therefore represent the interests of the citizens and thus, be an avenue for civic engagement with the state. It should be noted that weak legislature represents a breakdown of effective civic communication between the State and its citizen and a manifestation of breakdown of trust between the state and its citizen (Momoh, 1996).