

POST COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS AND ECONOMIC CRISIS IN NIGERIA: IMPERATIVES FOR 'THEATREPOWERMENT'

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Abstract

The year 2020 ushered in reports of coronavirus ravaging China, and consequently, grounding their economy, various countries shut their borders to curtail the spread as a preventive measure and Nigeria also followed suit by imposing an emergency lockdown which affected all economic activities. The economic impact has affected Nigerians, as they complained of untold hardship, hunger and strife, increase in crime rate, violence, rape, robbery, and kidnapping among others and this has motivated this study. Despite various support from government and non-governmental funding organisations, Nigeria still witnesses low economic growth. The study, therefore, investigates the effect of Covid-19 on Nigeria's economy and seeks to determine how theatre facilitates and provides socio-economic support in Nigeria using 'Theatrepowerment'. The study adopts a qualitative research method through interviews and observation by participation, to assess the effect of Covid-19 on Nigeria's economy. The study finds out that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on the economy of Nigeria which has resulted in considerable disruptions in supply chains, the loss of jobs, and a reduction in income, among others. The study among other things advocates 'Theatrepowerment', for socio-economic change in contemporary theatre practice.

Keywords: Theatrepowerment, Coronavirus, Recession.

Introduction

The pandemic of COVID-19 has had a huge influence on the world economy, with numerous nations enduring recession and economic disaster. One of Africa's greatest economies, Nigeria, has been severely impacted by the pandemic, which has resulted in high inflation, job losses, and a steep fall in revenue. Okeowo emphasises that:

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the Nigerian economy, which was already struggling with a range of structural and systemic issues before the pandemic hit. The pandemic has resulted in the loss of jobs, income, and livelihoods for millions of Nigerians. The impact of the pandemic has been felt across different sectors, including healthcare, education, transport, and tourism (31).

The decline in the price of oil, which has traditionally been Nigeria's primary source of export money, has made an already difficult situation for the country's economy considerably worse. As a direct consequence of this, the revenue of the country has significantly decreased, and the government is having a hard time meeting its financial obligations. Other structural and systemic difficulties, such as poor infrastructure, weak institutions, and inadequate social services, contribute to Nigeria's already difficult economic situation and make it much more difficult to address. Adejo notes that “almost forty per cent of the population of Nigeria lives in conditions that are considered to be poor” (211), giving Nigeria one of the highest poverty rates in the world. Moreover, the nation has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, with more than 33 per cent of the population being unemployed or underemployed at any given time.

The informal sector, which is responsible for employing a sizeable share of Nigeria's labour force, has also been impacted negatively by the pandemic. The pandemic has had a particularly devastating effect on the informal economy, causing the closure of

a large number of companies, which has resulted in a loss of both jobs and income. The epidemic has also contributed to a drop in tourism, which has had a significant negative effect not only on the hospitality business but also on the economy as a whole. Imhonopi explicates that:

Covid-19 has impacted the informal economy, which produces a large part of Nigeria's economic drive. The pandemic has closed many informal companies, causing job and income losses. Tourism has dropped dramatically because of the pandemic, weakening the hospitality industry and economy. (55)

To lessen the impact that the epidemic will have on the economy, the government of Nigeria has implemented several different policies, such as fiscal and monetary policy initiatives. Small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) play an essential role in the economy of Nigeria; as a result, the government has enacted fiscal stimulus packages to lend assistance to these businesses. Via several social safety programs, the government has also offered financial assistance to households that were previously considered vulnerable.

The increasing rate of hunger, strife, lack of even distribution of palliatives, robbery and famine is another impact of Covid-19 on the economy. The situation is worse in the slums and ghettos whereby, social connectedness is the currency that nurtures the much-needed resilience/succour for communities to persevere in the face of crisis, as isolation, social distancing and quarantine are enforced, thus breaking this social cohesion. Suffice to say it that, the federal and state government provided palliatives: food, clothing, and cash gifts to citizens, but the majority of the masses didn't benefit hence, they resort to self-help, through all available sinister means. A casing point is the fact that, during the lockdown, some random group called one million boys are operating in groups, to rob citizens and dispossess them of their

valuables in Lagos, Ogun and Ibadan. This is happening, just as the IMF on 14th April, warned the global community to brace for tough times ahead due to the recession. Ozili notes that:

The crisis presents a very serious threat to the stability of the global financial system. Following the COVID-19 Outbreak, financial conditions tightened at an unprecedented speed.... The world economy will shrink by 3% rather than expand by 3.3% as thought back in January. (11)

The pandemic has also had a substantial negative impact on the tourism industry in Nigeria, which is a significant contributor to the country's economy. The closing of international borders and the imposition of migration restrictions has led to a decline in tourism, which in turn has led to a loss of revenue and employment opportunities.

Assessing the Impact of Covid-19 on Nigeria's Economy

In Nigeria, the Recession is not new, in 2016, Nigeria witnessed an economic recession, and the monetary authority in Nigeria aided the local currency from forced devaluation against the dollar and adopted a managed float foreign exchange system, which worked well from 2016 to 2019. However, the looming recession is more dangerous than the previous ones, because the developed countries that ought to aid Nigeria, cannot participate in economic activities as well, for fear of contracting the virus and secondly, their economy is also affected negatively. According to Ozili:

The Covid-19 pandemic affected the global economy in two ways. One, the spread of the virus encouraged social distancing which led to the shutdown of financial markets, corporate offices, businesses and events. Two, the rate at which the virus was spreading, and the heightened

uncertainty about how bad the situation could get, led to flight to safety in consumption and investment among consumers and investors...There was a consensus among top economists that the coronavirus pandemic would plunge the world into a global recession.³ Top IMF economists such as Gita Gopinath and Kristalina Georgieva stated that the Covid-19 pandemic would trigger a global recession. (7)

From Ozili's view, the global economy is shrinking and many investors have reduced labour hire, declined in business activities, and brought about a reduction in the income, tax and IGR capacity of their countries. Thus, many countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, Italy, Nigeria etc reviewed and slashed their budget, while some other countries had to obtain loans to support their budget. Some states have also reviewed and slashed their budget in line with the new socio-economic realities and consequently, many companies had to retrench their workforce. According to Aljazeera.com, over 44.2 million workforce were terminated as of July in the United States, as a result of the receding economic crisis of the companies.

With these developments, coupled with the huge debt profile of Nigeria, gross embezzlement and mismanagement of funds, it is obvious that, the socio-economy of Nigeria and indeed the world at large is gradually dwindling, there is a looming disaster as the society may witness a spike in the volume of atrocities: Hooliganism, Thuggery, Violence against women and girls, Robbery, Kidnapping, Armed insurrection, Insurgency, Militancy, etc. There is, therefore, a need for the Nigerian government to bell the cat, by engaging in proactive measures that could avert the looming disaster, through a public-private partnerships, investment in the entertainment industry, entrepreneurial skills and youth empowerment. This is because, any government that must witness socio-economic stability, must

give credence to the youth, because of their innovation, creativity, vigour, commitment, hard work and team spirit. As the nation continues to deal with the economic repercussions of the epidemic, it is vital to seek out innovative ways to foster economic recovery and expansion. This essay examines the role of theatre in motivating individuals and communities to overcome the pandemic's economic concerns. Using the unique power of 'theatrepowerment', Nigeria may promote entrepreneurship, job creation, and economic development, leading to a brighter future for its population.

Imperatives for Theatrepowerment in Nigeria

Theatrepowerment is a coinage of two words- Theatre and Empowerment. It denotes the empowerment avenues or initiatives within the praxis and practice of Theatre, that can salvage the situation, hence government, multinational organisations, and stakeholders should explore this avenue, to quickly recover the economy from the shackles of recession.

Olusola emphasises that "Theatrepowerment is the ability of theatre to empower individuals and communities by providing a platform for creative expression, promoting social change, and fostering personal growth and development" (3). Through 'theatrepowerment', a person's capacity for self-expression, creative endeavour, and overall development can all be enhanced through participation in theatrical activities. The theatrical profession provides employment opportunities for performers, directors, authors, technicians, designers, and stagehands, among others. These jobs contribute to the entire economy by providing individuals and families with work opportunities and revenue earnings.

There is no gainsaying the fact that there are numerous outlets/avenues for empowerment in the arts and theatre industry, a mastery of these skills/vocations will create self-sufficiency and cushion the harsh economic conditions of Nigerians during and

after the coronavirus pandemic. These avenues include but are not limited to Makeup design, Costume design, Photography, Filmmaking, Comedy skits, Music, Acting, Directing, Dance, Painting etc

Make-up Design: Beyond decorative functionality, make-up is an art that gives smoothness and glamour to the appearance of a person. This skill is relatively cheap to acquire and beyond film production and theatrical performances, it's one of the most lucrative jobs for youths, virtually all birthday photoshoots require the services of a make-up artist. Weddings, burials, and naming ceremonies are filled with different make-up artists, who make up a guest at a token. Even more profitable is the new trend of making headgear (Gele), as a special brand, with different designs and shapes to reflect the creativity of the artist.

Photography: According to Wikipedia.com, Photography is the art, application and practice of creating durable images by recording light or other electromagnetic radiation, either electronically utilizing an image sensor. In the past, it used to be a job for illiterates and dropouts, nowadays, it is one of the lucrative professions whose services are essentially required in society. With the innovation of digital cameras and HD lenses, people are now turning to studio shoots for different celebrations, while they are specially hired to cover events/programmes, they are specially paid for this on-express delivery. Some photographers take different shots of guests unannounced, edit and print them without the guest's consent, and then bring it for the guest to pay, the guest who sees a more glamorous picture of himself/herself will not refuse this offer, because more often than not, pictures speak memories and memories are part of our lives. (thanks to innovation in ICT and technology).

Filmmaking: Nollywood is becoming a global brand, after being ranked the second largest film producer in the world in terms of quantity, after Bollywood (India Film Industry). It provides close to 500,000 direct and indirect jobs, contributing to the GDP of the Nigerian economy. This is because, for a movie production to happen, different services will be needed, directors, actors, location managers, scriptwriters, editors, continuity managers, cameramen, lighting designers, set managers, props managers, make-up designers, costume designers, etc. During this pandemic, when all other sectors were declining in IGR, the entertainment and telecommunications industry was blossoming, Netflix witnessed a surge from its previous value and increased to about 50 million\$, because people were bored at home and only movies could brighten their day. This infers that, if the government can concentrate on the entertainment industry more, there will be an increase in the economy of Nigeria.

Tie and Dye: This is an aspect of technical theatre that deals with the tying of fabrics to produce different patterns and designs. This aspect remains unexplored in the art and creative industry, the local production of these materials and fabrics can sustain the economy if imported, beyond the shores of Nigeria. The prospect lies in the fact that it can be applied to English wears, trousers and shorts, to exhibit creativity and aesthetics, should the youths be empowered in this dimension, there is no doubt they will create more employment opportunities and propagate these skills.

Comedy: While the world was at a standstill, and the harsh realities were gripping the global space, Nigerians were dominating Twitter space, blogs and Instagram, creating comic skits to relieve the people, some groups and persons gained prominence and increase the number of followers, due to the content of comedy, Taoma, Mr Macaroni, Cute Abiola among others are typical examples. By creating short dramatic skits and uploading them on youtube,

Nigerians could start earning from these skits, (of course, the content must be original, creative and hilarious) as soon as their viewership increases.

Music: This is one of the lucrative avenues of theatrical performance, countless dropouts have changed the fortune of their families and carved a niche for themselves through music. While numerous concerts are held outside Nigeria by Nigerian artists to entertain their fans across the globe during the lockdown, these musical artists started streaming live concerts, live Instagram, featuring other artists and increasing their income. If the Nigerian government can empower the youth to look towards these avenues, the current GDP will also increase. Some successful Nigerian musical artists include Joeboy, Burna Boy, Don Jazzy, P-Square, Tuface Idibia, Tiwa Savage, P Square, Korede Bello, Reekado Banks, Whizkid, and Davido.

Painting: This is an aspect of technical theatre. In times past, painting used to be a mere decoration on the wall to represent colour, but nowadays, painting is now a form of communication and expression. Different paints are now used to show creativity in films, backgrounds, wallpaper, houses and offices. During the pandemic, pictures of painting about restoring mother nature and humanity were appreciated and handsomely paid for. If the government can empower the youths with the right materials, this art can be exhibited and auctioned even in the global community.

Dance: This is the act of creating and expressing one's feelings, through one's body, in a rhythmic way. According to Wikipedia, Dance is a performing art form consisting of purposefully selected sequences of human movement. This movement has aesthetic and symbolic value and is acknowledged as dance by performers and observers within a particular culture. This is a lucrative avenue, whereby people pay heavily for dancers to come and entertain

them, even on social media/applications like Zoom. Despite the lockdown, dance training sessions were going on and different people have to pay to subscribe to dance classes online, because more often than not, dance is beyond mere expression, it is a way of life of a people. Segun Adefila, Bakare Ojo Rasaki, Kaffy, and Poco Lee are some of the people that have carved a niche for themselves in this field.

Acting: This is the most popular aspect of the make-believe profession, it involves the representation, the reenactment, and the imitation of a role in line with the demands of the director. Most people aspire for fame and a name in acting, but the stiff competition of who is who, soon chokes them and thus, they may resort to chasing roles through all means possible like sex, money, bribery or diabolic means. Some successful actors in Nigeria include, but not limited to: Toyin Oshinaike, Olu Jacobs, Joke Silva-Jacobs, Omotola Jalade, Genevieve Nnaji, Segun Arinze, Omoni Oboli, Funke Akindele, Jim Iyke, Ramsey Noah, Mercy Johnson, Olu Jacobs, Hilda Dokubo, Odunlade Adekola to mention a few. Several of them have featured and produced international films. We have Genevieve Nnaji who has graced the legendary Oprah Winfrey Show, and Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde (United Nations Goodwill Ambassador). Etc.

Theatre Troupe: This is the organisation and management of performances by a group of people, for entertainment/education. The National Troupe of Nigeria has represented Nigeria in foreign competitions and promoted our cultural heritage, however, Nigerian youths can key into this and explore it for economic growth, one could run a series of shows/performances in one night and the income alone can sustain more than 10 families. There are some successful private theatre troupes like the Jos Repertory Theatre, Ado Repertory Theatre in Ado Ekiti, Ankara and black

playhouse in Lagos, Bolanle Austene-Peters production in Lagos, Renegade Theatre in Lagos, Crown Troupe of Lagos, etc.

Directing: This is the art of coordinating all the dimensions of production to achieve a successful performance or film/music production. There are two dimensions to production, one is the artistic: which involves the performers, the scripts, music, characters etc while the other is technical: the light, set manager, location, continuity, sound cues, editing, props manager, etc. The job of the director is to harmonise these two creatively and create a performance/film/music for the audience's interest. There are many successful theatre, musical and film directors, who are multi-millionaires today, among which we find, but not limited to Tunde Kelani, Clearance Peters, Tade Ogidan, Bakare Rasaki, Ahmed Yerima, Kunle Afolayan, Anthony Onah, Chico Ejiro, Toyin Abraham, Kemi Adetiba, Sam Dede, etc.

Costume Design: Beyond wearing mere garments, a costume is an essential tool for communication, and Nigerians have taken the fashion space to a global level by showcasing exquisite designs, a mixture of materials from silk and cotton, many reputable fashion houses have emerged, and some top Nigerian celebrities are fashion ambassadors and brands. The Aso Ebi culture is still in vogue and the more creative a costume designer is, the greater the demand for his/her services. Folake Coker, Yemi Osunkoya, Oshodi Frank etc are among the successful costume designers we have in Nigeria today.

Suffice it to say, government alone cannot help the plight of the ailing economy, there is a need for commitment, transparency, discipline, accountability, and passion on the part of the government, while there is a need for the youths to also learn marketing skills, branding and packaging, innovation, creativity, competency, proficiency, efficient human and resources

management so that these efforts will not go down the drain. While the nation is still battling with the post-pandemic era, there is a need for extensive measures to be taken to reduce person-to-person transmission of COVID-19. Special attention and efforts to protect or reduce transmission should be applied in susceptible populations including children, health care providers and elderly people.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 epidemic has had a substantial impact on the economy of Nigeria, worsening the economic issues that were previously present in the country. The pandemic has affected several different areas of the economy, which has resulted in considerable disruptions in supply chains, the loss of jobs, and a reduction in income. Although the government of Nigeria has already taken several steps to reduce the negative effects of the epidemic on the economy, there are still other steps that need to be taken to stimulate economic recovery and growth in the country, one such is to deploy 'Theatrepowerment' avenues to revive the ailing economy.

'Theatrepowerment' can provide individuals with possibilities to earn a living and enhance their economic well-being. Theatrical productions necessitate a variety of skills and abilities, including acting, directing, costume design, and stage management. By giving training in these talents and opportunities to work in the theatre, it is possible to create jobs and produce revenue. This can be especially significant in regions with high unemployment or few other economic options.

Furthermore, theatrepowerment' can attract tourists and visitors to towns and regions, hence generating economic benefits for local businesses and communities. Theatrical festivals shows, and performances can contribute to the expansion of the tourism industry by attracting international visitors. Furthermore, through

education and training, ‘Theatrepowerment’ also provides individuals with useful skills and knowledge applicable to a variety of businesses, such as marketing, public relations, and event management, among others. Because theatre is a component of the creative industries, which also include film, television, music, and other art and entertainment disciplines, these industries contribute significantly to the economy through ticket sales, item sales, license fees, and other routes.

The study, therefore, advocates that any post-COVID-19 economic recovery strategy will need to re-prioritise the conditions necessary for the rehabilitation of health systems, the creation of culturally sensitive protection and community, peace and cohesion. The government should also embrace building measures that integrate, the recovery of lost livelihoods as well as setting an agenda, for a quick return to a path of economic growth, recovery and stability through human capital development, and the arts & entertainment industry offers such privilege. Interventions funds should be put to judicious use by political office holders and privileged entrepreneurs in the society should aid government efforts by sacrificing a token, from their material and financial reserves.

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