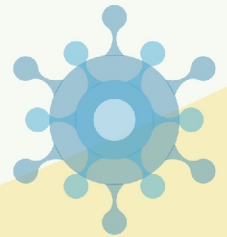


Policy Brief



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Mitigating the Impact of **COVID-19** on Nigeria's **Most Vulnerable Communities**



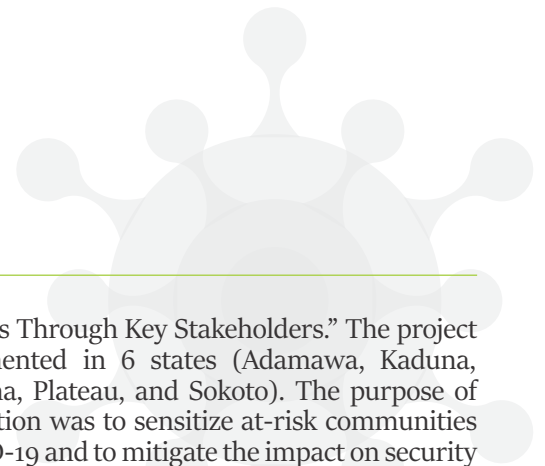
Policy Brief

Mitigating the **Impact** of **COVID-19** on Nigeria's **Most Vulnerable Communities**

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Executive Summary

The uncertainty and panic created by the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 was further exacerbated by emerging narratives of denial, misinformation, misrepresentation and in some cases, sheer ignorance about the virus outbreak. The sense of confusion generated by the pandemic was clearly a threat to many, and put many vulnerable communities at a higher risk. The impact of the pandemic on women and girls was also a thing of concern. At the national level, the intervention of the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 was not inclusive, with only one female, and no representation from key community stakeholders at the local level. Furthermore, it appeared to undermine the security implications of the outbreak, with no strategy on how to deal with threats to national security and stability. Consequently, the need to counter misleading information and provide expert opinion for local communities became urgent and necessary. It was also important to mobilize key stakeholders that are accepted and respected in the communities to support strategies that will mitigate the effects of COVID-19.

The Kukah Centre (TKC), with the support of the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF) program in the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) implemented the Project titled, “Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 on Nigeria's Most Vulnerable

Communities Through Key Stakeholders.” The project was implemented in 6 states (Adamawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Plateau, and Sokoto). The purpose of the intervention was to sensitize at-risk communities about COVID-19 and to mitigate the impact on security and stability through key stakeholders. This was achieved via research and data collection on the evidence of COVID-19 infections. Furthermore, the project undertook the sensitization of communities on the various misperceptions and misleading information regarding COVID-19 by providing the accurate information needed to stay safe. Additionally, the project highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on women and children, and identified strategies for mitigating them. Incidences of any threats to security and stability such as riots, protests, human rights abuses by civilians and security officials, and security threats occasioned by non-state armed groups were collected and documented. Various local communities were actively sensitized through media platforms such as TV, Radio, and Social media. Lastly, key stakeholders like the members of the National Peace Committee (NPC) were involved at the state and national levels to help facilitate the mitigation of any threat to national security and stability by engaging with key stakeholders and sectors of the society.

Background

On 27 February 2020, Nigeria confirmed its first case of coronavirus. This was the first case of coronavirus in sub-Saharan Africa¹. The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic came with huge socio-economic and financial impacts globally. Nigeria stood a high chance of being significantly affected due to its large population, weak health system and limited capacity to deal with major disease outbreaks. When the cases of infection started to rise in the country, the Federal government imposed total lockdown measures in 3 states (Lagos, Ogun and Kano states) and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), with state governments

imposing curfews as well. Furthermore, a ban was placed on public gatherings of more than 50 people, including religious, social, and market gatherings.²

While government responses were geared towards mitigating the spread of the virus, there were certain gaps/limitations in the government's COVID-19 Response Strategy. Firstly, various narratives of denial existed that were tied to religious misinformation and/or sheer ignorance; this exacerbated the situation, forcing some communities to ignore government directives on the lockdown. Secondly, the

¹ "Nigeria confirms first coronavirus case". BBC News. 28 February 2020. Archived from the original on 2 March 2020. Retrieved 6 March 2020 – via bbc.co.uk.

² "Nigerian Government Places Lock-down Measures against COVID-19". Archived from the original on 20 March 2020. Retrieved 19 March 2020.

government's ability to manage emerging threats to national security and stability occasioned by COVID-19 appeared to be not well assessed. There was also limited information on the number of women experts, advocates and agents who were contributing towards mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and how they

could be supported. The Kukah Centre (TKC), therefore saw the need and the opportunity for intervention by countering misleading information and providing expert opinions for local communities to lessen the impacts of the virus.

Methodology

The intervention was based on 5 indicators including: (a) Training of the project implementation team, (b) Research and Data Collection on the Impact of COVID-19 in Vulnerable Communities, (c) Media sensitization via different active media platforms, to educate local residents on the pandemic and general preventative measures, as well as issues affected by the pandemic such as gender and security. (d) Deployment of key

community stakeholders across 72 LGAs in 6 states to support the sensitization process and join the advocacy campaign, (e) Engagement by the National Peace Committee members in sending out positive messages and mitigating any emerging security issues viz-a-viz the project intervention.

Key Findings

At the end of the intervention,

- **142,478 persons were physically engaged, 80,528 males and 61,950 females.**
- **118,202 persons across 2,017 local communities were polled via the online research and data collection component.**
- **59,162 respondents reported that they had access to healthcare services.**
- **The major forms of Gender-Based Violence identified across the six states are: domestic violence with 21,768 cases recorded, rape with 8,644 recorded cases and sexual assault with 8,559 cases.**
- **A low participation of women in creating awareness on COVID-19 and peacebuilding processes was recorded in selected local communities across the six states.**
- **Armed robbery, Banditry, Farmer-herdsmen clashes, Insurgency & Terrorism, and Kidnappings were the prevalent forms of insecurity identified across the 72 LGAs.**
- **Media sensitization was carried out in 10 languages (English, Hausa, Pidgin, Fulfulde, Chamba, Bachama, Ham, Tyap, Sakwatanci and Zabarma).**
- **1,850,963 people were reached via the social media sensitization (WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook).**
- **WhatsApp has the strongest reach for social media sensitization.**
- **Over 5 million viewers/listeners (based on estimated communication outfit bandwidth coverage) were reached via jingles aired on 12 TV and Radio stations radio and TV jingles in the six states.**
- **Radio was the more popular information source for old media.**
- **Many people are tired of the COVID-19 safety protocols and have a strong desire to return to lifestyles before COVID-19.**

- Most believe COVID-19 is real but choose to ignore this reality so their daily lives can return to normal.
- Considerable success in informing the public on COVID-19, and correcting common misperceptions regarding the virus; over 25% of the people engaged reported a correction in their wrong perceptions of COVID-19 via the community engagement and media sensitization process.
- Perception of the Nigerian Government's response on COVID-19 split between approval and disapproval.
- Increased learning at the local community level that can be stepped down by beneficiaries.

- Common misperceptions and misinformation narratives include COVID-19 as a punishment from God, 'white man's sickness', form of extortion by the government, severe form of malaria, bioweapon and world-wide prank aimed at depopulating the world.
- Members of the NPC helped engage key stakeholders at the state and national levels, both online and offline, to mitigate threats to security.

However, in light of the second wave,

- COVID-19 sensitization is still essential to educate the public and combat misperceptions and/or misinformation.

Challenges



Some of the challenges associated with the project intervention included:

- **Low network connectivity:** There were some complaints by several LGFOs about the quality and strength of the network connection: some communities did not have good networks, and many people did not have data to fill the online forms.
- **Palliatives and rising expectations:** Many respondents complained of not having data to fill the e-questionnaires and often demanded compensation (oftentimes financial) after acceding to fill out the forms. As some of the communities currently engaged are post-conflict locations, the economic wellbeing of many members of the community are poor, and so, majority of the community stakeholders who were interviewed requested for some financial compensation and/or from the project before granting interviews.
- **Rising levels of insecurity:** while the rate of insecurity was not consistent and differed in degree from state to state, it nonetheless had several impacts on the project implementation process in terms of the ability of the LGFOs to freely and openly engage in their assigned LGAs. For example, the spill-over of pockets of violence

from the looting of COVID-19 palliatives and subsequent curfews imposed by various state governments such as Adamawa, Kaduna and Plateau hindered LGFOs from engaging in certain locations. Also, during the harvest season (November – December 2020) in the northeast, there was a recorded spike in banditry and clashes between farmers and herder pastoralists, who invaded farmlands, destroyed crops and in many instances, killed defenseless farmers who put up resistance.

- **Gender Inclusivity:** There was some difficulty in sourcing out eligible local women for the gender engagement due to the fact that a number of these women lacked the basic and relevant qualifications such as the academic and/or technological capacities required for this project, and/or the refusal of male figures (husbands/fathers) to allow the recommended women to take up the position of the LGFO. However, extra efforts were made to ensure that both men and women LGFOs were represented as equally as possible, because due to traditional and religious beliefs in some of the selected states and communities, male LGFOs would not be able to engage the women in the local communities. Therefore, the role of women as a

part of the engagement and sensitization process was essential.

- **Lack of Basic Skills:** Women and girls in the communities are not fully equipped with the basic skills to inform them on how to take part in the fundamental role in sensitization and creating awareness on issues that directly affects them in the community.
- **Limited support from key stakeholders:** The level of support from key stakeholders at the community and state levels were not always favourable, especially at the project inception. At the start of the community engagement process, some of the community members regarded the local government field officers (LGFOs) with suspicion, as local residents were unsure of what the project intervention was about. Consequently, the coordinators and LGFOs were provided with Letters of Introduction by TKC. The LGFOs were also issued e-ID cards to facilitate a smoother engagement process. This, combined with leveraging the influence and network of the coordinators, significantly reduced the level of suspicion and gave the process some level of credibility.

Policy Recommendations

From the evidence collected, there appears to be COVID-19 fatigue in the communities engaged. Furthermore, some of these communities seem to suggest that attention should be paid to structural issues of poverty, insecurity and the culture of impunity among security personnel, rather than the pandemic. While these suggestions have merit, the COVID-19 pandemic is still a reality that needs to be addressed. Consequently, TKC is putting forward the following policy recommendations:

State and Federal Governments

- The rise in the number of positive COVID-19 cases makes the need for more sensitization more urgent and necessary. Moreover, the increasing sense of a 2nd Wave nationally calls for a reviewed approach and new strategy of managing the pandemic. State governments should create more testing centres to facilitate the testing process. There must also be proper coordination between the federal and state governments to contain the threats of COVID-19. Emphasis must be laid on

increasing community awareness on the virus to ensure proper sensitization and correction of any misperceptions and/or wrong narratives.

- The rise in insecurity and poverty, which appears to have been exacerbated by the pandemic, requires that the governments place more emphasis on the economic survival of the people in the COVID-19 Response Strategy. The inclusion of, and dissemination of palliatives to



mitigate the increasing trend of social insecurity should be prioritized. Also, economic empowerment programmes for women and youth should be developed to help curtail rising crimes and insecurity.

- Gender mainstreaming including the use of gender analysis and/or evidence is oftentimes lacking in government policies. For instance, though some research was done on the impact of COVID-19 on pregnant women and nursing mothers, gender disaggregation on issues of COVID-19 was missing; there was no information on the number of women who had been infected, recovered or died as a result of the virus. There was also inadequate information on increasing levels of domestic violence occasioned by the pandemic and how it particularly affects women and children, the number of women who had reported cases of domestic violence to the security officials, the number of women able to access healthcare and information on women who had lost their jobs, businesses and other means of livelihood as a result of the pandemic. Furthermore, there was also limited information on how COVID-19 impacted the traditional roles of women, as well as no emphasis on the role of women in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. The government must ensure

gender disaggregation and mainstream gender equality to adequately address institutional and structural barriers, which will aid gender-responsive polices such as:

- * Research should be conducted on the state of women's economic and social rights and, with this knowledge as a benchmark, a plan and strategy should be devised for achieving women's economic and social rights.
- * Strategies aimed at preventing gender-based violence; adequate mechanisms on gender-sensitive policing and justice should be developed.
- * Adequate facilities should be put in place for medical, psychological, physical, and legal support for survivors of Gender-Based Violence (GBV).
- * The government and key stakeholders need to create workable platforms that support community members especially women's substantive representation in post-conflict governance, by providing direct technical and capacity-building support to women's involvement "at the table" in the peacebuilding processes.

Security Agencies

Perceptions about the security services within local communities remain negative and unappreciative. They are often seen as collaborators with some of the perpetrators of the insecurity, and as more interested in exploiting the conflict. Additionally, culture of impunity among security personnel such as brutality, extortion and/or unlawful detainment by security officials, does little to aid the relationship between civilians and the various security agencies.

- Security agencies should boost and intensify the security at the level of the local communities especially the high-risk areas/states.
- The respective state governments and relevant

security agencies must ensure that every security official involved in abuses of human rights is investigated and held accountable for their actions. This will help promote a greater sense of security in their various states.

- Security personnel should improve civil-military relationships and incorporate communities into responses to the conflict. This can be achieved through workshops, seminars, and a series of briefings.
- Security agencies should properly indicate and outline the proper avenues to report complaints and issues of injustices.

Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs), Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and International Development Partners

- International development partners should support the efforts of the state and federal governments in curbing the spread of COVID-19 by amplifying community sensitization processes. This includes educating local communities on the threats of the virus, the various safety protocols to adhere to, as well as promoting community stakeholder engagement in driving the narrative.
- Development partners should design and support a gender-sensitive strategy that addresses the tailored concerns of women, children, and those with disabilities. This should include programs of psychological counseling, confidence building, critical thinking, and participation in peacebuilding processes.

- Research should be conducted on the state of women's economic and social rights and, with this knowledge as a benchmark, a plan and strategy should be devised for achieving women's economic and social rights.
- Special sensitization programmes to educate women on their rights and roles as citizens should be carried out to help women defend and assert their rights in the face of violations and/or threats.
- An institute for women's development should be set up in northern Nigeria to broadly train women on public participation.

Community Leaders and Stakeholders

- Community stakeholder engagement is important ensuring the inclusion and representation of the voices of the masses and less privileged in policy engagements at the highest levels of governance. Therefore:
- Community leaders and stakeholders should support the efforts of the government and development partners in the COVID-19 sensitization process by taking ownership of the

advocacy campaign. This will promote increased learning, that will be stepped down to the community residents.

- Traditional and religious leaders, as well as leaders of the men, women and youth groups must ensure that they pass the right narratives to their fellow community members during such advocacy campaigns.



Conclusion

From the reports by the LGFOs, the community engagement process was welcomed and well received by the people engaged. Apart from the original beneficiary groups intended for the project implementation, individuals and some institutions outside the beneficiary groups also reached out for collaboration on the COVID-19 sensitization process, as the pandemic is still a reality. This underscores the need for more work to be done for Nigeria to flatten the curve and eradicate the virus. From the imposition of the lockdown to its lifting and resumption of daily activities, the context of COVID-19 and its accompanying impacts have been consistently changing. The rise in the number of positive COVID-19

cases makes the need for more sensitization more urgent and necessary. The increasing sense of a 2nd Wave, and the growing possibility of lockdown in different states, and nationally calls for a reviewed approach and new strategy.



HEAD OFFICE:

Flat C1, American Specialist Hospital Complex, (opposite Rockview Royale Hotel), 1, Luanda Crescent, Wuse 2, Abuja - Nigeria.

REGIONAL OFFICE:

#10 North Road, Abakpa, Kaduna - Nigeria.

+234 (0) 903 114 9816
+234 (0) 810 9531 981

info@thekukahcentre.org,
tkc.abuja@gmail.com,
kukahcentre@gmail.com

www.thekukahcentre.org

This policy brief was produced by The Kukah Centre, a Nigeria-based non-profit, non-governmental and public policy organisation that offers alternative approaches to the challenges of leadership and the impact of conflict on national development. Interfaith dialogue is at the core of the Centre's work and involves actively promoting conversations among Nigeria's faith communities, as well as between leaders in faith and public policy. The Kukah Centre's core programme areas include: Interfaith Dialogue, Peace and Conflict Resolution, Leadership Training and Development, Good governance, Public Policy Research, Memory and Knowledge Preservation.

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More information on The Kukah Centre can be found at:

<https://thekukahcentre.org/>

You can also reach us directly via:

Email: kukahcentre@gmail.com

Tel: +234 (0) 903 114 9816

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