

NIGERIA TO RELAX COVID19 LOCKDOWN: MEASURES TO PREVENT SPREAD THROUGH PUBLIC TRANSPORT AND SHARED TAXI STILL MISSING

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30TH April, 2020, Abuja

COVID19 came as a shock to world leaders, who were neither prepared nor have relevant response to curtail it in the immediate, irrespective of previous pandemics. The panic reaction to curtail the spread was to significantly limit physical contacts between residents, hence a lockdown. This swept across cities of the world and Nigeria was not left out. The lockdown in Abuja, Lagos and Ogun by the Federal Government and subsequently lockdowns in different other cities of Nigeria by the respective State Governments came as an immediate response and enabled the curtailing of the spread of this contagious deadly virus. This however came with huge other health and socio-economic costs on individuals, families, communities, the Nation and the world at large.

2. It is no longer news that over 1,533 persons in 34 states has been confirmed with the virus, with 44 deaths and 255 recoveries as at 28th April, 2019. This is a huge burden on the health system with humongous financial implications for Nigeria.

3. I wrote and published an initiation article on 19th March, 2020 when the total confirmed cases in Nigeria was only 8, the article was titled ***“COVID19 and implications for public transport and shared taxi in Nigeria”*** in the article, I drew the attention of stakeholders to the fact that different measures are being rolled out to curtail the spread of the virus in Lagos and Abuja which had the cases at that time, and that there was no single measures on public transport and shared taxi available yet. Based on this, I presented the implications, mentioned examples of steps being taken in sister climes and made 4 cardinal recommendations specific to transport and with a conclusion that all other measures being taking may end up fruitless if the transportation components are not adequately addressed. This elicited the attention of some media organizations and I was on TV and radio to discuss it. Only until 23rd that both Lagos and Abuja brought out some measures on transport and was replicated by rivers state among others, the published measures were not comprehensive, yet there was weak enforcement.

4. Almost 6 weeks later, like a prophecy, transport became the conduit pipe through which COVID19 has spread from 2 cities to 34 states, and from one corner of the city to the other, yet still counting.

5. As the consequences of the lockdown bites, Mr President acting on the advice of the respective organs responsible for containing the virus has announced new measures preparatory to relaxing the lockdown on 4th May, 2020.

Is a Further Lockdown Necessary?

6. Since the Presidential address announcing to relax the lockdown, there has been series of debates on different platforms, including on the social media, electronic and print media for and against this decision, a friend told me “I pity this country, why should we place economics over lives? Would you rather be hungry in your house or be a COVID19 patients in an isolation center?” opinions may differ but relaxing the lockdown is the way to go.

7. It is obvious that the nation, like many other nations of the world cannot afford a sustained lockdown which consequences has crumbled world economies. In his own words, the WHO Director General Special Envoy on COVID19 wrote on his twitter handle “This virus is going to be with us for the foreseeable future & nobody wants to go on having lockdowns as we have at the moment.... we need #COVIDready societies”

8. Similarly, the WHO Director General stated in a media briefing on 22nd April, 2020 “Make no mistake: we have a long way to go. This virus will be with us for a long time....there’s no question that stay-at-home orders and other physical distancing measures have successfully suppressed transmission in many countries. One of the greatest dangers we face now is complacency. People in countries with stay-at-home orders are understandably frustrated with being confined to their homes for weeks on end. People understandably want to get on with their lives, because their lives and livelihoods are at stake. That’s what WHO wants too. And that’s what we are working for, all day, every day. But the world will not and cannot go back to the way things were. There must be a “new normal” – a world that is healthier, safer and better prepared”

9. The consequences of a lockdown is not just about economics, it’s about livelihood, it’s about health, it’s about humanity. Unconfirmed report by a commentator on radio says, in Lagos, domestic violence and other abuses have tripled in the last 2 months, do anyone knows what that means to marriages and children in such homes in the long term? Is there any study to understand the mental health implication of these lockdown? That said, can we also look in brief the economics? In a country with 98million population living below the poverty line according to world Bank, 50-70% of the workforce in the informal sector and relying on daily income, according to Pwc, with only 2% of bank account holders having up to N500,000 in their account according to a recent report quoted by Prof Charles Soludo, locking down in a planting season for farmers, yet in a nation that rely on oil as its economic mainstay when the price of crude per barrel has crashed to as low as \$11, and there are no buyers of oil? We can only be heading for a disaster to accept further lockdown. The piece written by Prof. Charles Soludo titled “*Can Africa Afford Lockdowns*” put this in better perspective.

10. The way forward is to accept the fact that this is reality and as the WHO Director General said, “This virus will be with us for a long time”. Accepting this fact means that we must put measures in place to live with it. That includes accepting a “new normal” where life must go on, and businesses must be allowed to thrive with people taking personal responsibility to stay safe while government creates the safe environment to enable that to happen. Government must also increase capacity to test more people in a faster way, enhance contact tracing, quarantine and treatment of confirmed cases. And particular, relaxed locked down means people will move, that means that there must be strong measures to address the transport gaps. But then it was surprising that the measures reeled out by the president on 27th while announcing to relax the lockdown from 4th May, 2020 and the subsequent details release by the Presidential Task Force on COVID19 on 29th did not again contain measures on transportation except the ban on interstate travel for passenger vehicles.

The Public Transport and Shared Taxi Issues in COVID 19

11. My initiative article on this subject earlier stated captured sufficiently public transport and shared taxi issues in the face of covid19, kindly read up. However, for the benefit of doubt, let me remind us that our kind of public transport which is largely informal, and controlled more by private individuals is susceptible to spreading diseases such as this. This is because of the unorganized nature, overloading, picking and dropping passengers without designated locations, amongst other informal approaches. Item 2 of the self-protection guideline by NCDC says “Avoid close contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness. Maintain at least 2 meters (5 feet) distance between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing repeatedly” how do one interpret this in the light of public transport or shared taxi? What is the fate of the man who enters bus from

Maraba to Federal Secretariat in Abuja, or the man who enters gulf from Shoprite in Apo to Garki area 1 in Abuja? What about the man from Mile 2 to Ikeja in Lagos or that one that enters in the different cities Portharcourt, Yola or Enugu, sokoto and Ibadan?

12. While some of these issues are constitutional, which empowers states to legislate on, some are not. There are organized urban transport service providers, Unions, staff buses of Government and corporate organizations, amongst others. It is therefore imperative and was thus expected that the Presidential Task Force will provide a general template that guides both transport operators that are federal in nature and with flexibility for states to leverage on to draw up measures that are peculiar to their domain. This will ensure standards and enhance uniform enforcement.

13. No doubt some states have taken the initiative and announced some measures, such states include Lagos, Rivers, Abuja and Delta. In the COVID19 Relaxation Speech by Governor Okowa of Delta States on 28th April, 2020, he said "Transportation services can resume under the following passenger load guidelines: 2 passengers at the back for tricycles (keke), one passenger in front and two at the back for taxis, and a maximum of two passengers per seat for buses". This is good but what are the gaps in it?

- a. It is not comprehensive,
- b. Does not guarantee that passengers can't be infected from the vehicle and
- c. Does not touch on the terminals and bus stops.
- d. Does not address how the operator will recover the losses arising from passenger reduction, or is price increase an option?
- e. What should a passenger do if a driver is violating and vice versa
- f. Is this just advisory or what are punitive measures for violation?

Recommendations Specific to Public Transport and Shared Taxi

14. Giving the contagious and dangerous nature of the virus, stringent measures are required to maintain social distance in the transport sector. Some cities in other climes which have relaxed the lockdowns have seen rise in confirmed cases of COVID19 essentially because the stringent measures to prevent the spread such as below where not put in place. Without prejudice to my recommendations in the initial article, the following are therefore recommended for consideration

- a. No passenger vehicle should carry more than 50% of its passenger capacity or there must be an empty complete seat in between any two passengers in the same vehicle.
- b. All passengers boarding a vehicle through an authorized passengers loading points should undergo temperature test, only those within allowable body temperature shall join the vehicles
- c. It is mandatory for passengers and in vehicle workers to wear masks, and the driver is mandated to decline picking a passenger that is not wearing mask
- d. Motorcycle taxi (Okada) is suspended until further review
- e. All passenger vehicles must be sanitized after every trip
- f. Authorized transport terminals whether private and public, and authorized bus stops and motor parks must be sanitized at least daily
- g. Authorized terminals, bus stops and motor parks shall have hand washing facilities or alcohol based hand sanitizers
- h. Public transport and shared taxis not loading from an authorized terminal and bus stops must have in vehicle sanitizers, passengers not willing to use the driver's sanitizer must have his/her own and use it at boarding

- i. Passengers who sense a violation should alight from the vehicle and provide information to security agencies for further actions
- j. All individual vehicle owners using their vehicles for commercial or private purpose are obliged to comply with this guidelines
- k. Mobile courts should be intensified to try violators and ensure appropriate punishment
- l. A stimulus package should be considered, just as is being done to other sectors, to mitigate the impact of these measures
- m. Government MDAs and corporate organizations should develop a work from home plan and hourly optimizations to reduce the need for mass movement of persons at pick hours, and office congestion.
- n. City authorities should promote cycling and walking as best social distancing personal transport, this may include opening temporal cycle lanes and offering incentives to users as seen in other climes.
- o. A subcommittee on transportation should be set up to ensure the implementation of this measures

Resources

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