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**COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown: Livelihood Struggles and Coping
Experiences of Precarious Migrant Construction and Transport Workers
in Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria**

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Abstract

COVID-19 Pandemic has affected different categories of workers in diverse ways. The paper seeks to interrogate the livelihood challenges of those in precarious employment with a focus on migrant construction and transport workers in Awka during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The paper explores the coping strategies adopted by these urban poor in the face of the severe shutdown and abrupt termination of their marginal means of livelihood by the State and National governments. The paper also sought to find out the forms of assistance, or palliatives, if any from governmental, non-governmental organizations, corporate bodies and individuals. The paper is an in-depth study of select construction and transport workers who are not indigenes of Anambra State, using In-depth Interview Method and Focus Group Discussion. The study revealed, that trapped in precariousness, the daily paid workers in the construction and transport sub sectors of the informal economy faced double jeopardy, not only in terms of the starvation earnings that are irregular, and uncertain, but in its total stoppage, with no safety nets, nor savings to fall back on. It also provides insights into the nature of the relationship that these masons, bricklayers and transport operators have with their ad hoc employers and the State.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, precarious employment, livelihood struggles, informal sector, social networks

Introduction

In 2019, a novel Corona Virus disease, which variant became commonly known as COVID-19 started in the City of Wuhan, China. The world, at first did not give the disease sufficient attention, as even the global health body, the World Health Organization (WHO) was itself hesitant in declaring it a deadly

scourge with potential repercussion of global dimensions. It was initially thought to be a local Chinese problem, until it started spreading like wild fire to Asia, Europe, and North America, Africa and the rest of the world, killing hundreds of thousands of people across the globe within months. This highly contagious and deadly disease earned the status of global pandemic, when WHO on March 11, 2020 categorized it as a public health calamity (WHO, 2020; Tavares, Santos, Diogo & Ratten, 2020). Globally, COVID-19 cases have reached 146,091,986 and 3,096,579 deaths as at 25th April, 2021 (Dong, Du & Gardner, 2021).

The world was caught unprepared, and in response, quickly excavated a cocktail of responses from the menu kit, some of the actions or responses taken in 1918 during the Spanish Flu. Wearing of face marks, washing of hands regularly and then, the most bizarre, quarantine of whole communities, lockdown or shutdown of all businesses and activities became the ready-made recipes to contain the spread of COVID-19. This was totally strange, as otherwise active and bubbling communities became ghost cities, a caricature of their former selves.

Country after country came up with executive orders, restricting movements, in some cases compelling people to stay indoors. If this were to be a one-off thing, perhaps it would have been taken in good faith, or as leisure, even though conscripted or commandeered. But it wasn't, as in some countries, it lasted for months on end, some lasting more than six months. Only few weeks ago, just before Easter Celebration, there was ease of restriction in the United Kingdom, almost one year after.

In Nigeria, there were also experiences of similar lockdowns, as Nigerian governments, National and State took a cue from the events and developments in the international community, and from the prodding of the World Health Organization. The Federal Capital Territory, Lagos and Ogun States had extended lockdowns. From March, 2020 schools at different levels (primary, secondary and tertiary) were all shut down. Some lost the 2019/2020 academic year owing to the ravaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The total closure of roads, businesses and offices, affected in varied ways the work environment of both the developed and developing world. However, it is evident that the developed world had social security mechanisms to deal with such emergencies, and these are not readily available in the developing world. The news media are awash with thousands of dollars given to families in the United States of America as COVID-19 support. Besides, the experiences from the COVID-19 shutdown are not same across Nigerian working population. For the Nigerian Public Servants, their monthly salary and allowances were promptly paid at the end of every month, while for those in the private sector, it was a different bargain. For a daily paid worker, the experience of an unplanned shutdown of activities is nothing but a nightmare, a horrendous and fiendish experience.

The paper focuses on migrant workers in construction industry and transport operators who are not indigenes of Anambra State, the site of the

study, whose daily struggles to get food on their table, feed their families, send their children/wards to hospitals were seriously threatened.

In Sub Saharan Africa, informal employment takes about 75 percent of all non-agricultural jobs (Gottfried, 2013). The Nigerian informal sector accounts for a significant portion of employment and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2018, ILO estimates indicated that about 93 percent of all employment in Nigeria is in the informal sector (ILO, 2018). This is further buttressed by the Bank of Industry (BOI) that asserted that Nigerian Informal Sector accounted for 65 percent of the country's GDP (BOI, 2018)

It is from this humongous number of people that more directly feel the brunt of a holistic cessation of all economic and social activities that the nucleus of this current study was formed.

The objective of the paper is to unpack the coping mechanisms, or more appropriately the survival strategies adopted by construction and transport sector persons on daily earnings that are not fixed but situational.

- To determine the types of assistance or support, if any, that were available to the precarious workers from governmental and non-governmental organization, and individuals.
- To discover how the workers transitioned back to their daily routines, post COVID-19 shutdown,
- To examine the lessons, costs and benefits that the precariat labourers given their work situation received in relation to the COVID-19 shutdown and the accompanying outcomes.

These and more shall form the crux of the paper.

A brief review

Although the government is the single largest employer of labour in Nigeria, it is in the field of the informal sector that is found significantly higher number of workers. The informal sector encompasses the multitude of economic activities that are outside the official and bureaucratic regulations of the State. The informal workers represent by far the largest segment of the worldwide labour market (Agawala, 2009). The Bank of Industry (2018) notes that the sector comprises any economic activity or source of income that is not fully regulated by the government and other public authorities; this includes enterprises that are not officially registered and do not maintain a complete set of accounts, and workers who hold jobs lacking basic social or legal protection and employment benefits. Examples of informal employment workers include street traders, subsistence farmers, small scale manufacturers, service providers e.g., hair dressers, private taxi drivers, carpenters etc. Informal work, therefore, refers to those work activities or sites that are outside the purview of the State, and is labelled precarious work because their jobs do not provide employment stability, are low waged and lack social protection. They therefore have no safety measures or fallback position.

Located within the precincts of the informal sector, if not its core characteristic, is the notion of precarity. To Standing (2011, 2012) the precariat refers to a cohort of insecure people, living bits and pieces lives, working today and not working tomorrow, as jobs are mainly short term, without a scintilla of occupational mobility, nor stability. Existing research in developed societies is replete with instances of damaging effects on such categories of workers, when work places are rashly and unilaterally closed by employers, leaving in its wake a gaping hole, or empty environmental space (Blyton and Jenkins, 2012; Gardiner *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, the experiences of redundancy are a result of the conjuncture of enabling and constraining contextual factors (Dobbins, Plows and Lloyd-Williams, 2014).

The foregoing scenario lends support to the assertion by Baines, Cunningham and Shields (2017) that a close affinity exists between precarious and unpaid work, because in reality, there are shifting experiences of work and non-work life following redundancy for the precarious labourers. Maury (2020) points to the experiences of migrant workers in the context of precarious labour markets. A significant marker of precarious work is the ever-present force of labour insecurity and uncertain livelihoods (Armano & Murgia, 2017). This image of precarious work is fully captured by Rubery, Grimshaw, Keizer & Johnson (2018) who submitted that precarious work is characterised by part-time, temporary and zero-hour contracts, as well as dependent self-employment.

It is however not all gloom for precarious work in the literature, as some scholars point to the promise of expectations, where the incidence of unpaid work can, with the effluxion of time transit to future paid work (Alaeorska, 2017). However, this promise of Eldorado, in the Nigerian setting may remain a mirage given the rentier character of the Nigerian State, and its prebendal, oppressive and repressive parasitic leadership that are far removed from the feelings and sensibilities of Nigerian suffering masses. It may therefore be a herculean challenge to accept the persuasions of the Stepping Stone Perspective (Jayyra, Arranz & Garcia-Serano, 2017) given that the country itself is hunted by a class of rapacious local predators who continue to hold sway within the local, states and national contexts.

The Stepping Stone Perspective which espouses the temporality of precarious employment suggesting the likelihood of positive outcomes in part-time work has been effectively rebuked by the Dead-End Perspective, which contrastingly considers precarious part-time employment more negatively. The thesis of the Dead-End Perspective is that precarious employment is part time, with low wages, fewer fringe benefits, if any at all, no training, limited career prospects, and a higher risk of non-employment than mainstream workers. The predominance of the informal sector as a fortress of precarious employment goes to show that rather than abate, the precariat class is even more embedded. This led Munoz-Comet & Steinmetz (2020) to assert that these categories of workers are trapped in a sequence of part-time jobs, and more spells of non-

employment that hinder prospects for regular full-time employment and stable work trajectories.

The perpetration of precariat labour in the urban cities has been given further impetus by migration, both international and local, particularly rural – urban relocations. In their study of migrant workers in Beijing, Zhao & Jin (2020) presented a detailed account of how internal migrant networks utilising the arsenal of social capital served as a source of recruitment and settlement of the new precariat class. Such networks, according to them come in handy for a newly arrived migrant who now deploys his consanguineal and other relationships to deal with the emerging challenges, risks and other costs in the new labour market he is exposed to. These migrants having limited access to institutional assistance from governments were left with no choice than to rely on their old primordial connections, reinforcing in the process, their home-based networks. Usually, these migrants stay together as an economic safety net and pool of emotional harbour. Migrant networks are vehicles of reciprocity as migrants who are already domiciled in the new urban centres extend invitation to, or have their kinsmen express desire to join them, and in the process, get involved in similar work experience. It is perhaps a cushioning effect. This finds theoretical support with the Social Network Theory as espoused by Castells. However, this adventure may also end for those in precarious employment like construction and transport subsectors, in an oasis of immiseration. It is however to be seen how these social networks played a role in mitigating the closure of economic and social activities following the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a possible panacea to the challenges faced by the precariat, there is in the literature a growing interest in flexicurity, which the European Commission (2007) defines as an integrated strategy to enhance simultaneously flexibility and security in the labour markets. The Commission maintains that introduction of greater contractual flexibility will have a double-barrelled effect namely provide employment, and ipso facto reduce unemployment, and secondly, open up the labour market space for those on the fringes, or outsiders to come on board. Four pillars that underline the concept of flexicurity as espoused by the European Commission have been neatly summarised by Heyes (2011) to include;

- (1) Flexible and reliable contractual arrangements from the perspective of the employer, of insiders and outsiders,
- (2) Comprehensive lifelong learning strategies to ensure the continual adaptability and employability of workers,
- (3) Effective active labour market policies that help people cope with rapid change, reduce unemployment spells and ease transitions to new jobs,
- (4) Modern social security systems that provide adequate income support, encourage employment and facilitate labour market mobility. (p. 644)

However, as noted by Heyes, the flexicurity agenda is somewhat ambivalent, and its enforcement came, owing in part, to the primary nature of capitalism, which continues to flourish because of its unprecedented capacity to expropriate and suck value. Not much, outside lip service, has been heard about the concept of flexicurity in Nigeria, and this makes it difficult to assess its propriety or otherwise. The unemployment trap and job crises in Nigeria are rather intensifying and continuing unabated. With COVID-19, the effects on the labour market given the volatility of the socio-economic business environment are rather imagined than described.

Materials and methods

This paper obtained data largely from semi structured in-depth interview of a sample of migrant precarious labourers and transport operators (*keke* and shuttle drivers, and other transport operators and toll collectors) in Awka, the capital of Anambra State. The aim was to elicit everyday realities and working lives (or redundancies) of participants, and how this informed their responses in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. The study also used another qualitative method, the Focus Group Discussion to complement the responses from the interview data. Given the nature of the research and the need for in-depth understanding of everyday occurrences, a small sample of 57 participants was deliberately chosen. The study participants were chosen through purposive and snowballing sampling. 30 of these are construction (building) workers who gather daily in the *Ogbo Olu* (job market arena) in search of jobs. Out of that number, 21 are men, while 9 are women, with ages ranging from 16 – 59. Majority of the participants are however less than 45 years of age. All of the study participants are from outside Anambra State, with majority arriving from Ebonyi and Enugu States. There are others from Benue, Kogi, Taraba and Jigawa States, while a few are not Nigerian citizens, arriving from Togo and Benin Republic.

For the transport operators numbering 27, their ages range from 19 – 40, with many of them coming from states in Northern Nigeria, and Ebonyi, Enugu and Abia States in the South East. The interviews were conducted in Igbo, and Pidgin English for non-Igbo speaking participants. Gendered construction of transport business effectively restricted the participation of women in the sample obtained from the transport sector, as no women were seen either as *keke* or shuttle bus drivers, or toll collectors.

The interviews lasted for three months, November, 2020 – January 2021, and each interview lasted between 70 – 110 minutes. Although participants were assured of their anonymity, their identification, to them, was irrelevant, as they gave their permission to the researcher to use their given names, or pseudonyms, whichever is preferred by the researcher. The researcher made use of 3 research assistants who were graduate students and quite conversant with the thematic issues under consideration. One of the research assistants is from Ebonyi State, where a good number of the participants came from.

There were two different groups used in the Focus Group Discussions. One was an all-female cohort of 6 involved in the construction industry as mason assistants, popularly called “serving mason”, with their ages ranging from 19 to 30. All of them have been in Awka for more than five years and are from Ebonyi and Enugu States. The other was an all-male group of six drawn from the transport sub sectors. The conversations were centred on experiences during COVID-19 lockdown, survival strategies, interventions from government, non-governmental agencies and individuals, work experience and challenges. All of these were also recorded, transcribed manually, with thematic guidance and direction.

Awka, the area of study, is the capital of Anambra State. The town is also host to Nnamdi Azikiwe University’s main campus with more than 30,000 students, mostly living off campus. It is also the Diocesan Headquarters of both the Catholic and Anglican denominations. The construction industry is witnessing renewed activities as many estates are springing up, and the entire town is being built up, with farmlands being converted to residential areas. Awka is at the heart of Igboland known for the celebrated apprenticeship scheme through blacksmithing. Igbo apprenticeship has been copiously documented in the literature (Igwe, Newberry, Amoncar, White & Madichie, 2018; Nnonyelu & Onyeizugbe, 2020).

The thematic data analysis involved manual coding of the data with a focus on the participants reaction to the COVID-19 lockdown covering the relevant themes of precarity and their coping strategies in the face of forced closure, or termination of their sources of livelihood. These participants’ experiences, in the face of a novel corona disease and its consequential aftermath, will help in “building commonalities as well as divergence in the narratives” (Ryzik Bo & Anitha, 2020).

Findings

The findings below are presented under the themes of livelihood struggles during COVID-19 pandemic, coping strategies during COVID lockdown and assistance from governments, NGOs, families and individuals.

COVID-19 pandemic in the eyes of the respondents

Perception of the precariat workers about COVID-19 pandemic at first was that of indifference. They still continued life as if nothing was amiss, going to the *Ogbo Olu* (labourers’ market) daily to offer their labour power. The commodification of labour, and sale of labour power appear to be on display in the labourers’ market where those involved in the construction of homes or agricultural activities, visit to haggle and bargain with these labourers for a fee, on a daily basis. One of the labourers said:

“Hmm, I don’t know anything about COVID. It is not for me and my family. God will not allow it”. (*James, 28, Construction Mason*)

Another interview respondent had this to say:

“As for me, COVID, or whatever it is called is a sickness of rich people. How many poor people have you heard that this COVID thing killed” he asked. (*Elechi, Male, 22, Construction Mason*)

“Oga this thing is something the government is using to eat money, show me any poor man or woman that has been killed by COVID? (*Chima, Male, a keke (tricycle) Driver, Age 25*)

I just got a sad news from home that my father’s younger brother was sick for only 3 days, got admitted in the hospital and died. They said it was COVID that killed him.” (*Onyinye, Female, Labourer, Mason Assistant, Age 29*)

Similar expressions came from the discussions in the FGDs. In FGD, the all-female group, one of them, named “Charity, Age 24, Female” was so dismissive of COVID, that she felt that “it was a white man’s disease”. COVID cannot survive in this hot weather.

Survival strategies during lockdown

Even in their general state of unbelief, the government at both National and State levels declared a total shutdown. Anambra State closed Eke Awka market, gyms, restaurants and bars, and banned all gatherings, including burial, wedding ceremonies of more than 50 persons, attendance to church etc, as well as closure of Inter-State travel. The Onitsha Bridgehead and Amansea Bridge bordering Enugu were closed to traffic. A study at home order was declared by the State government to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Oluchukwu (Male, Shuttle Bus driver, from Enugu State, Age 42) said

“In my entire life, I have not seen anything like this, for one week I did not know where my next meal would come from. I was eating from hand to month”.

Okorie said that

“It is only God that knows how I survived. Staying without going out to search for job and getting money to feed my family was an experience I don’t want to remember.” (*Age 49, Ebonyi*)

Ifeanyichukwu, another Shuttle Bus driver, said,

“I started driving more in the night when during the day, I could not get enough passengers, driving empty when I managed to come out, but the government now placed a curfew in the night also.” (Age 23, Ebonyi)

Captain had this to say

“We started regularly visiting a closed compound for betting (pools gambling) and all I had went down the drain. My condition became worse. I suffered oh” (Male, 30, Kogi, *keke* driver).

Some had to trade their priceless possessions like Mgbafor (Ebonyi, Female, 37 years, Labourer):

“I sold my only piece of cloth to feed my family when I couldn’t get a job at *Ogbo Olu*”.

For Isaac (Age 33, Taraba, a *keke* driver)

“I could not face the trouble of not feeding my wife and 3 young children; I sold my musical instruments and I was able to get foodstuffs for my family.

The female group revealed that an *isusu* contribution or pay off for the month of June, 2020 helped in cushioning the effects of the lockdown. In the words of Mary:

“I received Five thousand naira, and this helped me to fend for myself.” (Mary, Ebonyi, Labourer, Age 27)

Another said that he managed to find a way back to his town near Abakiliki, and did substantial farming.

“I went back to farm in Abakaliki for several months during rainy season.” (Nwasike, 22 years, *keke* operator)

“I didn’t have much trouble to worry about because of my parents. They managed to provide food in the house.” (Kelechi, Enugu State, Mason, Age 25)

Government/Non-governmental organizations/Individual interventions

On the question of whether they received any form of governmental assistance, one of the respondents sighed and said

“Government? Do they know that we exist? They only care about themselves please.” (*Innocent, Aged 43, Abia, Shuttle driver*)

The other respondent said

“I heard of it on the radio, but didn’t see anything. Maybe they gave it to their own people only.” (*Musa, 22, Male, Construction Labourer, Jigawa*)

One of the discussants in the Focus Group Discussion, Chibuike (Male, 41, Ebonyi, Labourer), had this to say:

“Did you not see where the government hid the palliatives in the stores when people were dying of hunger? How do you want to explain that; it means that the palliatives were not meant for the people”.

“I received assistance from my pastor who gave me three thousand naira to enable me buy foodstuff. As a widow, it was like manna from heaven.” (*Charity, Widow, Aged 31, Ebonyi State*)

A Togolese, one of the respondents retorted when asked whether he received any assistance, saying:

“When they couldn’t give any support to their people is it me that they will give?” (*Kosi, 47, Mason*)

Post lockdown work experience

The researcher also investigated the experience of the respondents in the face of the new normal, after the COVID shutdown experience.

“I lost so much during the lockdown and I don’t think I have been able to recover enough. God is in control.” (*Mama Emeka, Female, Age 36, Labourer, Enugu*)

“Life is actually returning to normal; construction work is beginning to pick up. These days, I go out and most times I am lucky to have a job for the day.” (*Enyinna, Age 33, Mason Assistant, Ebonyi*)

Schools are now open, and the traffic is growing. I now make as much as I was getting before COVID thing. (*Mike, Age 25, Male, Benue, Shuttle driver*)

Discussion

The Corona Virus disease which took the world by storm left severe consequences on the configuration and activities of local markets. Apart from the millions of cases and casualties, the world economy has been considerably decimated, devastated and traumatized. No single incident since the Great Depression in the early 1930s, or the Second World War has affected the world's businesses and livelihoods so tragically. In fact, the literature is replete with instances and sites where employers have considerably extinguished workplaces, or local labour markets particularly in vulnerable areas (Beynon et al., 2002; Keep & Mayhew, 2010). It seems apposite to state, given the narratives of the respondents that in their estimation, governments declaration, or rather imposition of shutdown, and restriction of movement, was harsh and cruel, as their livelihoods and interest seemed not to have informed government policy.

The precarious labourers, artisans and transport operators were most vulnerable. Compounding the vulnerability for most was their not being from Awka or Anambra State, that is lack of the support of indigeneity, or traditional social networks which culminated in their feelings of exasperation and total helplessness. The shutdown, except for its duration would have thrown them further below the poverty line. Rather than serve to ameliorate the precarity of the labourers and transport operators, the government turned them into victims by their policies.

The findings reveal strikingly core difficulties of precarious work, and illuminate the consequences of disruption of labour markets in the absence of any coordinated assistance or measure. The workers were left on their own to meander, or simply struggle to stay alive. This further reiterates the dissonance between those in positions of power in Nigeria at different levels, and those who they are expected to represent. The gulf between the leaders and the led became even more stark and evident.

The experience of the precariat workers goes to challenge the argument of Giddens (1982) that even the most seemingly powerless individuals are able to mobilize resource whereby they carve out "spaces of control". There was a case of resignation to fate, not to the agency of their actions, as the looming threat of permanent redundancy was enough to castrate their urge. The coping strategies for the precarious migrant labourers and transport operators were mixed, but their experiences reinforce the continuing utility of traditional support networks in the context of an absent governmental initiative. Self-help still enjoys normative currency, as the government has shown that citizens are on their own. The absence of private savings helped to exacerbate the situation for most of the precariat, making their lives and livelihoods to hang in the balance. For as in the case of Italian precarious parents, Ba (2019) contended that households in the regions of Central Italy were able to absorb some of the negative effects of unemployment and underemployment because of historically accumulated private savings. This was unfortunately not the case in Awka; therefore, it was difficult to reconcile the purpose of the government's

COVID-19 policies against the necessity by the precariat to obtain daily subsistence.

This category of labourers and transport operators present normality as a daily struggle, where they adapt to an insecure life, even though that adaptation does not convey a feeling of acceptance or happiness with their precarious state.

Conclusion and policy implications

This paper presents an investigation of the livelihood struggles and coping strategies of a cross section of precariat labourers and transport operators in the face of COVID-19 shutdown. It was seen that the experiences of the precariat migrant construction and transport operators were not palatable. The precariat class lived with the forced closure, not out of choice, but coercion, and this further lowered the esteem of the government in the perception of the precariat class. Their survival strategies were at best self-directed, and self-sustained since nothing tangible, if any, got to the marginalised daily paid, self-employed workers and labourers. We conclude following Ba (2019) that any form of normality, during and after COVID-19 shutdown, “is akin to struggle, as their normality is precarious normality and not accepted as such. It is a daily struggle for survival”.

The policy implication is that the swelling number of the precariat class makes it compelling for the government to show more interest in the activities within the informal sector, particularly with a view to incentivising the labour market.

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