Place of Language on Nigeria's Economic Recession and Food Shortage

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Abstract

This work examines the place of language in Nigeria's economic recession and food shortage. For a country like Nigeria that has witnessed economic recession about three or more times, the mention of recession attracts with it fear and nostalgia of hardship. It evokes a remembrance of hard times in the nation's life. One of the basic indices of economic recession is hunger. Many reasons are given as the cause of this unwelcome phenomenon. These reasons range from over dependence on oil to corruption. Hardly is the language factor ever mentioned. This article, therefore, takes a cursory look at some aspects of Nigeria's economic recession and food shortage that is linked to language. It is found that certain corrupt practices have linguistic origin. So also, are some official acts like recruitment into armed forces and admissions into academic institutions. Corruption helps to entrench mediocrity in governance, work, and social life. The after effect of the chain of corruption and incompetence is a fall in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which ultimately leads to recession. It is suggested among other things that a re- orientation of Nigerians to embrace one another in love irrespective of linguistic boundaries willgoa long way in tackling and preventing constant economic recession and food shortage.

Keywords: Recession, Food Shortage, Language, Orientation, Government.

Introduction:

Recession has become a common word in "modern" times. For some decades up till now, countries have encountered what some people term "economic meltdown". It is a situation in which a country suddenly finds it difficult to cope with the needs of its citizenry. These needs may come in form of inadequate

shelter, lack of food, clothing, poor water supply, lack of electricity, and general high cost of living. In recession, there is usually an abnormal "high jump" in the cost of food items, building materials, transportation, and general cost of production.

Language has been variously defined. Collins Dictionary defines language as a system of communication which consists of sounds and written symbols which are used by people of a particular country or region for writing and talking (collinsdictionary.com). The Oxford Languages defined language as the principal method of human communication consisting of words used in a structured and conventional way and conveyed by speed, writing, or gesture (google.com). The most common use of language is for human communication. Different languages and different dialects exist. People, nations, and ethnic groups are often identified by their indigenous languages and dialects. Such dialects and languages create bond between the users. They see themselves as one with a common interest in the midst of apparent competition. This often informs their struggle for positions and what is generally termed "dividends of democracy." In employment, political positions and social life, they would prefer to have their brothers and sisters who speak the same language with them to occupy significant positions. The consideration for qualification and competence may be secondary. Fulfilling such desires creates mediocrity and a bunch of incompetent workers and administrators occupying sensitive positions. The outcome most often leads is low productivity which leads to recession and food shortage. This is glaring in Nigeria's civil service and administrative positions.

Nigeria witnessed an economic recession and food shortage within the first two years of the administration of President Mohammadu Buhari. According to analysts of political history, this recession is the fifth in a series of recessions encountered since Nigerian independence. That recession seems to have taken people unawares considering the reaction of the masses. Many people expressed surprise at the unprecedented rise in the cost of living. Fuel price jumped from ninety-seven naira per liter to one hundred and forty-five naira and later to one hundred and ninety-seven naira. Recently, under Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration, it has gone up to one naira thousand per liter while the price continues to fluctuate in the official market around a thousand naira. A basin of

garri that usually sold about ₦1500 – ₦2000 naira hiked to ₦5000. Presently, it oscillates between ₦10,000and ₦12000 in the local markets. Generally, prices of commodities and services have continued to increase since the government announced the recession. That is the situation in almost all sectors of the national life.

The government pleaded with the people to show understanding. In order to come out of the economic "quagmire", the Buhari government embarked on "aggressive food production programs". The government sincerely supported the rural farmers. It subsidized the cost of fertilizer, supplied crops, seeds, seedlings, chemicals etc., to the farmers which they in turn used to boost food production. The government anti – recession program yielded positive results. The cost of many goods reduced. Farmers were encouraged to do more as they enjoy the reward of their labor in terms of more money. The government, after a year of the agricultural programs was happy to announce a near end of the recession. This was evident in the visible improvement of the standard of living of Nigerians. This was to be short lived as the government never continued the agricultural programs the following year. It was not sustained, and so it crashed. Its effects are still with the nation to this day as cost of living and food shortage continue to be on the increase. Some other factors arose and worsened the situation by making market prices unstable. The recent naira redesign and the cashless policy of the government are some of those factors. The situation has not changed much even with the coming of the new administration of President Bola Tinubu. Nigerians are still grappling with high cost of living and poor economic conditions. The recent removal of fuel subsidy worsened the matter. However, the government tried to cushion the effect by initially giving civil servants thirty thousand naira monthly before finally increasing the minimum wage.

Recession as viewed by some Nigerian elites

Economic recession has been viewed in varied ways. Generally, recession can be taken to mean difficult times in the life of a nation or country. In recession, there is less of business activities, trade, investment, parties etc. Ibenegbu (2017) defines recession as the decline of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for two months or more in the consecutive quarters. According to him, GDP is the market price of all goods created within the country. It takes into account new products that have

never been manufactured or produced in the country. Ibenegbu observes that Nigeria is experiencing economic recession because of a significant decline of GDP. Available data, according to him reveal that GDP decline in the first quarters 2016 is 0.36%, where the second quarters show 1.5%. He also notes that the number can be misleading as the economic recession and financial crisis can occur without Gross Domestic Product.

Babalola (2017), commenting on Nigeria and economic recession, explains that a recession has many attributes that can occur simultaneously and includes decline in component measures of economic activity (GDP) such as: consumption, investment, government spending, and net export activity. These summary measures, according to Babalola, reflect underlying drivers such as; employment levels and skills, household savings rates corporate, investment decisions, interest rates, demographics, and government policies.

The average Nigerian has his own conception of recession. He does not care much about technical definitions of recession or words associated with it. He does not care to look for further meanings of the concept. He believes he understands fully what recession is by the experience he undergoes. If an average Nigerian begins to witness abnormal increases in prices of commodities, hunger, etc., he senses that all is not well. If he spends more on transport in a proportion that is unusual, he understands that something serious is happening with the government and the people. When all these happen, he now links his situation with whatever nomenclature that is associated with it. In the same vein, a Nigerian resident within the country may not need to be told that the nation has come out of recession. He experiences it and understands it. In all, the highest indicator for the average Nigerian about the state of affairs is his stomach. For him, any recession that affects his feeding has gone too far. The present economic situation in the country has left the average Nigerian not in doubt that there is an abnormality for which he or she has to be completely in his or her toes to survive. For him or her, it is all about government policy/policies which his or her experience shows to be unfriendly. He/she does care so much what label is attached to that condition. Whatever the condition is called, he/she conceptualizes it as unfavorable. For him/her, recession is concerned with this adverse situation.

Causes of economic recession and food shortage

Many people have adduced recession to so many reasons. Corruption is the most common factor people state as the major cause of economic recession in Nigeria. The fact is that recession is caused by a conglomeration of many factors that are most often peculiar to each country or state. Factors and causes of recession are interwoven. It is difficult to find out at what point these factors start having a negative effect on the economy. The effect of all the factors may not appear at the same time. Some factors may still have other causative influences embedded or enclosed in the overt issue under consideration. The Emir of Kano, Sule Lamido, cites borrowing as one of the reasons Nigeria is having financial crisis. He advised the country to stop the blame game and look towards success. Oladele (2017) posits what he refers to as four big mistakes that led to Nigeria economic recession. One of them, according to him, is the inability of the previous administration (led by Goodluck Jonathan) to save for the rainy day. In other words, there was no preparation for the "storm." He said that, there are no manufacturing industries to offer employment to the teeming population of school leavers. The country has also not been lifted from being a consuming nation to a manufacturing nation. It should be noted that as far as 2023, the administration that took over from President Goodluck Jonathan administration did not make a significant shift from the paradigm. Another mistake mentioned by Oladele is the delay in the signing of the budget. Most of the business activities of the government follow the line of the budget. Once the budget is not signed into law, it paralyses all other activities. The last mistake mentioned by Oladele as the reason for Nigeria' economic trauma is Nigeria's over – dependence on foreign products. Most African nations including Nigeria are consumer nations. Most of the African nations in this category do not have a robust economy.

Language is also a factor that plays significant role in determining recession. In elections, those who vote, often do that along language and ethnic lines which in turn breeds mediocrity. Candidates earn much votes from their ethnic or linguistic base even when their opponents from some other linguistic or ethnic groups are glaringly more competent. However, it has to be admitted that Nigeria's 2023 election results show that the electorate is gradually moving away from voting along linguistic and ethnic lines to supporting competence and integrity. It is a good development that may diminish some effects of those factors that lead to

recession and improve Nigeria's political/linguistic/psychological landscape. In another perspective, any orientation on how to improve the economy or what people should do to address political or administrative issues is normally done with language. Adherence to such instructions is mostly dependent on the power of language of communication. The Nigerian Constitution for instance, was translated into the three major Nigerian Languages for easier comprehension. It is when people understand what they should do that they act accordingly. The same applies to the participation of the people in the affairs of the nation. Businesses are mostly transacted using language medium. These businesses to a large extent determine the state of the economy which in turn affects the issue of recession.

The activities of militants and pipeline vandals constitute another reason Nigeria went into recession. The militants and pipeline vandals destroy facilities which help in the manufacture and transportation of oil which forms Nigeria's main economy. The ripple effect of such action last for a long time. Up to the present year, 2023, Nigeria is still grappling with the activities of oil pipeline vandals and associated thefts. Hardly any week passes without reports on national dailies on the nefarious activities of these hoodlums.

As earlier mentioned, there may be other hidden factors that cause recession other than the ones mentioned above. No single factor can be said to be the cause of recession without the effect of other factors such as corruption, ethnicity, and religion, Corruption has been categorized as the bane of Nigerian economy. It is asserted for instance, that political corruption is a persistent phenomenon in Nigeria. At average, every Nigerian agrees that corruption is a problem that has to be rooted out. It is difficult to pass a single day without people being aghast of revelations of "corruption practices" witnessed in Nigeria. This can just be seen flipping the pages of the national dailies or browsing through the social media. Bahasa (2017) states that corruption is now a plague affecting the Nigerian nation as it increases in accordance to the growth of the nation. He attributes the major causes of corruption to low standard of living and greed. UzoChukwu (2017) describes corruption in Nigeria as the biggest challenge. Quoting Morris (1991), he defines corruption as dishonest and fraudulent conduct by those in power; typically involving bribery. According to Morris (1991), it is the illegitimate use of power to benefit a private interest. Professor Peter Nwangwu describes corruption

as a potent cancer that has mercilessly eaten Nigeria to a state of stupor. It is no hidden truth that corruption in Nigeria is endemic. It is affecting all the aspects of national economy and family survival.

Report from Transparency International in the year 2000 found Nigeria to be the most corrupt country among 90 countries surveyed. In 2001, Nigeria was ranked the 2nd most corrupt country out of 91 countries investigated worldwide. It maintained the same position in 2002 and 2003 analyses. Nigeria was the 3rd most corrupt country out of 146 nations surveyed in 2004. There was an improvement in 2005 when it was ranked 8th out of 158 and further improved in 2006 when it took the 21st position among 158 nations measured with corruption index (Nwangwu, 2021).

Many people have attributed Nigeria's corruption to different factors including poverty, ethnicity, ignorance etc. as major factors.

Though many never recognized the linguistic factor that plays a major role on the issue of corruption in Nigeria. The linguistic effect will be recognized more when one notices that Nigerian politics is majorly played along ethnic lines which most often are bound by language ties. People who speak the same language most often see themselves as having greater bonds. They are normally more determined to help people of their own stuff and often with the same language background even at the detriment of others. In their bid to help these "linguistic brothers," they sometimes go out of their way to cut corners and indulge in corrupt practices. One may get an instant position he may not have merited just because he or she is of the same dialect with those in charge. One can succeed in an interview by merely speaking a dialect. The outcome of such exercises may be that the best is not chosen. This eventually breeds mediocrity in some vital areas of national life.

The ripple effects of the corrupt practices as mentioned earlier add to the factors that necessitate economic recession. Inter-ethnic clashes sometimes occur as a result of linguistic boundaries. When such conflicts arise, properties worth of millions of naira, houses and investments are destroyed leading to decline in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). What follows then is economic meltdown.

In admission, recruitment, and employment, language expression plays significant roles that affect such exercise. Certain admissions are sometimes made to favor a particular language group. This may result in accepting mediocre persons who may require other "crooked maneuvers to keep their position in school. Such students are the ones that institutionalize "expo" in their various schools. If they find themselves in government offices in the same way they got their admission, they find a way of looting the state treasury. In doing so, the ember of inflation, corruption, and economic recession is continually. fanned into flame.

Ways out of Nigeria's Economic Recession and Food Shortage

Recession is a very huge economic issue that requires urgent and all-embracing attention. It requires the effort of both the government and the citizens to restore the economy to normalcy. There are divergent views of what could be done to bring an economy out of recession. Solution to economic problem is highly dependent on the cause(s) of the problem, the environment, and the determination of those fighting for the reverse. It is even more urgent to reverse recession when one realizes that majority of Nigeria's populace count economic downturn on the basis of the "food on the table". For them, any economy that cannot allow an average citizen eat well at least three times in a day is not working. It will be assumed nothing else is in progress because you must have to eat to be active in the society. Availability of food is therefore, a significant index of recession.

Commenting about the way forward, the Emir of Kano is of the opinion that the most important thing is to look forward for development rather than focusing in the past. Abdullahi (2016) points out that Nigeria will come out of its present predicament if there is increase in production and investment in agriculture. In a similar opinion, the former Minister of water resources, Suleiman Adamu observes that extensive, all year-round, irrigated agriculture had become more imperative considering the drastic decline from petroleum export.

It is an undisputable fact that agriculture has been the main hub of Nigeria's economy before the oil boom of the 70s that changed the focus of the nation from agriculture to petroleum. Agriculture can help in diversifying the Nigerian economy if given its proper place. Agriculture guarantees food availability. When

people eat well, they will be in a better position to tackle the problem arising from all aspects of the economy. A common Nigerian axiom, 'a hungry man is an angry man' is relevant today as ever.

The Buhari administration used agriculture in repositioning the Nigerian economy that suffered huge recession. The government employed many tactics to do this. They used the media to motivate people to farm. This is part of the language factor of economic recession earlier mentioned. The medium of the information passed has a lot of influence on how the information is received. The government provided fertilizer and other aids to farm-work. People cued into it. The result is marvelous. Within a year, Nigeria was perceived to have come out of recession. Unfortunately, the tempo was not sustained up to the following years. This condition devastated the gains of that year. Today, people have sank back to abject poverty and hunger.

Another area that might require serious attention both from the government and the citizenry is in the aspect of orientation. Mass orientation is necessary to enable Nigerians understand themselves as one. The words of the 2nd stanza of the old Nigeria's national anthem should be drummed into the ears of every Nigerian in order not to allow language to be a source of division amongst them. The words of this stanza of the national anthem appear thus: "...though tribes and tongues may differ, in brotherhood we stand…" Strategic and serious orientation is required in this regard. It is to be noted also that "hate speeches" also follow similar trend of language and ethnic boundaries. Hate speeches can lead a nation to serious crises that may take years to resolve. One of the major consequences of such crises is serious and threatening economic recession. Government, groups, and individuals should provide platforms that will dissuade hate speeches. Peace, harmony, mutual co-existence should be the watchword of all and sundry. It is often said that a stitch in time saves nine and that prevention is better than cure. Linguistic medium can be turned around from being a dividing factor to being a unifying medium. This is most likely to be achieved when love and togetherness is preached to the people in their own language and especially by their own people

Conclusion

Economic Recession and food shortage is what no reasonable nation would advocate. It touches the life of the citizens negatively. Many factors and remedies are apparently associated with corruption while the language influence appear unnoticed. If the language or linguistic aspect is given due consideration accommodated at their right place, chances are that economic recession would have been given a big blow in Nigeria. Just as recession do not suddenly take place one day, remedies can take considerable and sustained time to take serious effect. All aspects of the economy should be seriously guarded and maintained for the nation not to carelessly fall to other waves of recession. It should however, be acknowledged that there are some factors unforeseen and unpreventable that can lead to a meltdown of the economy. Such factors may include natural disasters and some endemic and pandemic diseases. A country should be aware of the possibility of such and subscribe to the right architecture as not to be caught unawares. Being pro-active is fundamental.

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