The Impact of Fuel Subsidy Removal on Poverty in Nasarawa State

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Abstract

The removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria in 2023 represents one of the most impactful fiscal reforms in recent national history, with profound implications for household welfare and poverty levels across the country. This study critically investigates the impact of this policy on poverty in Nasarawa State, leveraging primary data obtained from a structured household survey administered across urban and rural areas of the state. The study examines changes in household income, expenditure, access to social services, and livelihood sustainability before and after subsidy removal. Findings reveal that the policy has significantly exacerbated the incidence of poverty in Nasarawa State, with rural dwellers disproportionately affected due to increased transportation costs, food insecurity, and limited access to palliative measures. While the federal government introduced conditional cash transfers and other social intervention programs to cushion the effect of subsidy removal, the study observed that many of these initiatives were poorly targeted or inadequately implemented, thereby limiting their intended impact. Moreover, the structural weaknesses in existing social safety nets failed to provide meaningful protection for the most vulnerable populations. The study situates its analysis within the broader context of Nigeria's macroeconomic reform agenda and highlights the paradox of policy intentions versus on-ground realities. It also critiques the short- to medium-term implementation strategy of the subsidy removal, arguing that without robust institutional frameworks and inclusive policy design, such reforms risk deepening inequality and social discontent.

Keywords: Fuel subsidy removal, poverty, Nasarawa State, economic reform, Nigeria.

Introduction

Fuel subsidy has long been a cornerstone of Nigeria's social and economic policy, designed to buffer citizens from the volatility of global oil prices and ensure affordable access to petroleum products. Since the discovery of oil in the 1950s and Nigeria's subsequent emergence as a major oil producer, the government has intervened in fuel pricing to stabilize the domestic market (Okonkwo & Ugwuoke, 2018). Subsidies have helped keep fuel prices artificially low, ostensibly to reduce transportation costs, control inflation, and improve the general welfare of Nigerians, particularly the poor majority (Akinola, 2020).

However, over the years, this policy has come under increasing scrutiny due to widespread inefficiencies and systemic issues. Mismanagement and corruption within the subsidy framework have led to significant fiscal burdens on the government, with billions of naira lost annually to leakages and fraud (Ezeani & Onwumere, 2019). Additionally, critics argue that subsidies distort market dynamics, discourage private sector investment in refining and distribution, and create dependency on government handouts rather than sustainable economic solutions (Nwankwo & Chika, 2021).

Recognizing these challenges, the Nigerian government undertook a bold policy shift in 2023, fully removing the fuel subsidy under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration. This decision aimed to stem fiscal hemorrhage, enhance transparency, and redirect funds towards critical infrastructure and social development projects (FGN, 2023). The policy also sought to foster a competitive, market-driven petroleum sector, thereby encouraging efficiency and private sector participation.

While the removal of fuel subsidy is lauded by some economists as a necessary structural reform, it has simultaneously ignited widespread economic consequences, particularly for vulnerable populations. The immediate aftermath saw sharp increases in the price of petroleum products, triggering a domino effect on transportation, food prices, healthcare costs, and other basic services (Ojo, 2024). These price hikes disproportionately affect low-income households, whose earnings are insufficient to absorb the added expenses, thereby exacerbating poverty and economic hardship (Adeyemi & Oladipo, 2024).

Nasarawa State, located in Nigeria's North-Central geopolitical zone, exemplifies these challenges. It is largely agrarian, with a significant portion of its population engaged in subsistence farming, alongside civil servants and small-scale traders. The state's limited industrial base and infrastructural deficits make it particularly sensitive to cost shocks (Nasarawa State Government, 2023). Increased transportation costs translate directly into higher prices for farm inputs and foodstuffs, undermining both food security and income stability for many households (Bello, 2023).

Moreover, the increased cost of fuel has strained access to healthcare services, as patients and health workers alike face higher transportation fares. The ripple effects have thus compounded poverty levels and reduced quality of life for many residents (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2023). Despite these emerging realities, there remains a paucity of empirical research quantifying the full extent of the subsidy removal's impact on poverty in Nasarawa State.

This study seeks to bridge that knowledge gap by systematically investigating the socio-economic consequences of fuel subsidy removal within Nasarawa State. It aims to provide policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars with data-driven insights to inform responsive interventions that can mitigate adverse effects and promote inclusive economic recovery.

Conceptual Clarifications

This section defines and contextualizes key terms central to the study, providing a foundation for understanding the theoretical and empirical discussions that follow.

Fuel Subsidy

Fuel subsidy refers to a government policy designed to reduce the retail price of fuel below the market equilibrium by compensating oil marketers or producers for the difference. This mechanism aims to make fuel affordable for consumers, thus lowering the cost of transportation, production, and energy-dependent goods (Adenikinju, 2003). Subsidies are often justified on social welfare grounds, especially in developing countries, where high fuel prices could significantly impact low-income households (Ebrahim, 2019).

However, fuel subsidies in Nigeria have been criticized for fostering inefficiencies, corruption, and fiscal burdens on government budgets (Adenikinju, 2014). The policy has historically been a double-edged sword: while it cushions consumers from global oil price volatility, it also distorts market prices and discourages investment in alternative energy sources (Onyeiwu & Akinyemi, 2018). The removal of such subsidies, therefore, aims to correct these distortions but risks immediate socio-economic shocks, particularly for vulnerable populations (Udoakah & Imoisi, 2023).

Poverty

Poverty is a multidimensional condition characterized by the inability to meet basic human needs such as adequate food, shelter, healthcare, and education (World Bank, 2018). It encompasses both absolute and relative deprivation, where absolute poverty refers to the lack of essentials for survival, and relative poverty refers to the lack of resources compared to societal standards (Sen, 1999).

In the Nigerian context, poverty is widespread and particularly acute in rural areas like Nasarawa State, where economic opportunities are limited and social infrastructure underdeveloped (NBS, 2021). The removal of subsidies has the potential to exacerbate poverty by increasing the cost of essential goods and services, thus reducing disposable income and access to basic necessities (Oluwatobi & Ogunrinola, 2020).

Food Security

Food security is defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2020) as a state when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. It comprises four pillars: availability, access, utilization, and stability (FAO, 2019).

Fuel subsidies influence food security primarily through transportation and production costs. Subsidized fuel lowers the cost of transporting agricultural inputs and outputs, thereby enhancing market access and affordability of food (Onyeneke et al., 2021). The removal of such subsidies can increase food prices, reduce household purchasing power, and worsen food insecurity, especially among the poor (Agbola & Olaleye, 2022).

Healthcare Access

Healthcare access refers to the ability of individuals and communities to obtain timely, affordable, and quality medical services necessary for maintaining health (Peters et al., 2008). Access is influenced by factors including geographic availability of facilities, affordability, and sociocultural acceptability (Levesque et al., 2013).

In developing countries, where out-of-pocket expenditure dominates healthcare financing, any increase in transportation and living costs which is often a consequence of fuel subsidy removal can restrict healthcare utilization (Aregbeshola & Khan, 2018). In Nasarawa State, limited healthcare infrastructure combined with rising costs threatens the accessibility of essential services, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the elderly (WHO, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the impact of fuel subsidy removal on poverty in Nasarawa State requires a theoretical lens that captures the complex relationship between macroeconomic policies, structural inequalities, and economic behavior. This study draws primarily on the Structuralist Theory of Poverty and Keynesian Economic Theory to analyze these dynamics.

Structuralist Theory of Poverty

The Structuralist Theory of Poverty argues that poverty is not merely an outcome of individual failings or market inefficiencies but is deeply embedded in and perpetuated by the larger socio-economic and political structures within a society (Lipton, 1983; Stewart, 2000). According to this perspective, macroeconomic policies, institutional frameworks, and power relations systematically marginalize certain groups often rural populations, ethnic minorities, or informal sector workers and by restricting their access to resources and opportunities (Barrett & Swallow, 2006).

In the context of Nigeria and Nasarawa State, fuel subsidies have historically functioned as a form of social protection by keeping transportation and energy costs low, thereby indirectly supporting the livelihoods of vulnerable populations engaged mainly in agriculture and small-scale commerce (Okoruwa & Ogundari, 2015). The abrupt removal of these subsidies without adequate safety nets risks reinforcing existing structural inequalities by increasing the cost of living disproportionately for low-income households (Adeoti & Oyerinde, 2018).

The Structuralist Theory emphasizes that policy changes like subsidy removal must be accompanied by comprehensive social interventions to mitigate adverse effects; otherwise, they risk exacerbating poverty traps and deepening socio-economic disparities (Narayan et al., 2000). This aligns with observations in Nasarawa State, where limited alternative employment opportunities and weak social welfare systems amplify the vulnerability of the poor following subsidy reforms (Ajakaiye & Adeyeye, 2018).

Keynesian Economic Theory

Keynesian Economics, formulated by John Maynard Keynes during the Great Depression, focuses on the role of aggregate demand in determining economic output and employment levels (Keynes, 1936). It posits that reductions in consumer spending power led to decreased demand for goods and services, which in turn results in lower production, higher unemployment, and slower economic growth (Mankiw, 2019).

Applied to the issue of fuel subsidy removal, Keynesian theory suggests that when fuel prices rise, household disposable income declines because a larger share of income is spent on energy and transportation costs (Oyebanji, 2021). This reduction in spending power diminishes aggregate demand, particularly in consumption-driven economies like Nigeria's. The resultant slowdown in demand adversely affects businesses, especially small and medium enterprises that rely heavily on local consumption, leading to job losses and increased poverty (Adeniran & Oyeniyi, 2022).

In Nasarawa State, where the economy is predominantly agrarian with a significant informal sector, the negative multiplier effects of reduced consumption due to higher fuel costs can be particularly severe (Okonkwo & Okechukwu, 2020). The Keynesian framework thus highlights the risk of short-term economic contraction following subsidy removal, unless counterbalanced by fiscal stimulus or targeted social protection programs to support affected populations (Iyoha & Oriakhi, 2016).

Integrative Perspective

Together, the Structuralist Theory and Keynesian Economics provide a robust framework for analyzing the multidimensional impact of fuel subsidy removal on poverty in Nasarawa State. While the Structuralist lens draws attention to the embedded social inequalities that shape vulnerability, Keynesian theory elucidates the macroeconomic mechanisms through which subsidy removal translates into reduced household welfare and economic activity.

This dual approach underscores the importance of policy design that goes beyond economic efficiency to incorporate social equity and demand stabilization measures. Without such holistic considerations, subsidy reforms risk deepening poverty and undermining sustainable development goals in regions like Nasarawa State.

Empirical Literature Review

Empirical investigations into the effects of fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria consistently highlight significant economic repercussions, especially on transportation costs, food prices, and poverty outcomes. For instance, Olayemi (2016) conducted a nationwide study which revealed that the removal of fuel subsidies led to an immediate increase in transportation fares. This rise cascaded through the economy, inflating the prices of essential goods, particularly food items, thereby worsening the living conditions of low-income households. Similarly, Ibeanu (2019) analyzed consumer expenditure patterns post-subsidy removal and found a marked increase in household food expenditures, which disproportionately affected poor families, many of whom had to reduce calorie intake or shift to lower-quality foods.

Adebayo (2022) provided further granularity by emphasizing the role of infrastructure quality in moderating the impact of subsidy reforms. His study argued that regions characterized by poor road networks and limited access to markets experienced higher transportation cost increments due to increased fuel prices. This infrastructural deficit intensified the poverty impacts because the cost shocks were not only higher but also more persistent, limiting economic activities and market accessibility. Given Nasarawa State's largely rural setting with pockets of semi-urban communities and relatively underdeveloped transport infrastructure, Adebayo's findings are particularly relevant.

However, despite these valuable insights, the bulk of existing research tends to focus on aggregate national-level data or broad regional analyses. Few studies have zoomed in on subnational entities like Nasarawa State, examining localized effects through direct empirical data collection. Nasarawa State, with its unique socio-economic profile primarily agrarian, limited industrial presence, and a significant civil service workforce presents distinct challenges and impacts from subsidy removal policies that national-level studies may obscure.

Furthermore, many prior studies rely heavily on secondary data or macroeconomic indicators without adequately capturing the lived realities of affected populations, such as changes in household food security, healthcare access, and small business viability. This gap limits the ability to design targeted interventions that address the nuanced needs of vulnerable groups within specific states.

Impact of Fuel Subsidy Removal on Socioeconomic Variables

Fuel subsidy removal has far-reaching effects that extend beyond the immediate increase in fuel prices, influencing a wide array of socioeconomic variables. Several studies have documented how these reforms can trigger inflationary pressures due to increased transportation and production costs, which in turn raise the prices of goods and services (Nwokeji, 2018). Inflation particularly hurts low-income households who spend a larger portion of their income on basic necessities, thereby exacerbating poverty (Olaniyan & Afolabi, 2020).

Unemployment is another critical consequence. As fuel prices rise, businesses, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs), face higher operational costs, which can lead to downsizing or closures (Adeyemi & Ibrahim, 2019). This dynamic reduces household incomes, limiting access to healthcare and education, both of which are vital for human capital development and long-term poverty reduction (Ajayi, 2021).

Healthcare access deteriorates as fuel price hikes increase transportation costs to health facilities and raise operational costs for healthcare providers, reducing service availability and affordability (Onwuchekwa et al., 2021). Similarly, education is impacted indirectly as families with tightened budgets may prioritize immediate survival needs over school fees and materials (Eze & Obidike, 2020).

Comparative studies from countries such as Ghana and Egypt offer valuable insights. Ghana's fuel subsidy removal in 2015 led to an initial spike in inflation and public discontent, but gradual economic adjustments and targeted social programs helped mitigate long-term adverse effects (Boateng & Owusu, 2017). Egypt's subsidy reforms beginning in 2014, paired with significant social safety net expansions, demonstrated that comprehensive policy packages are essential for cushioning vulnerable groups during transitions (El-Laithy, 2016).

Policy Responses and Palliative Measures

In response to the socioeconomic fallout from fuel subsidy removal, governments often deploy various palliative measures designed to cushion vulnerable populations. In Nigeria, attempts have included direct cash transfers, conditional cash programs, and subsidies on alternative energy sources (Ogbuabor & Onwujekwe, 2018). However, these measures frequently suffer from implementation challenges such as poor targeting, inadequate funding, and bureaucratic delays (Akinwale et al., 2020).

Social safety nets, such as the National Social Investment Program (NSIP), including the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) scheme, have been proposed as tools to mitigate the impact of subsidy reforms (Adepoju & Oloyede, 2021). Although the NSIP has increased coverage in some regions, gaps remain in reaching the most vulnerable, including rural households in states like Nasarawa (Nwafor & Okeke, 2019).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international development partners have supplemented these efforts with community-based programs that promote livelihood diversification and financial literacy (UNDP Nigeria, 2022). Despite these efforts, many beneficiaries report that assistance is insufficient relative to the scale of economic shocks experienced (Eze et al., 2020).

Research Method

Research Design

A descriptive survey design was employed using a structured questionnaire to capture data on the impact of fuel subsidy removal on poverty indicators.

Study Population and Sample

The population included residents across three senatorial zones of Nasarawa State. A purposive sampling technique was used to survey 250 individuals across demographics.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire focused on socio-demographic information and key variables: transport cost, food security, healthcare access, and business viability.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, Chi-square test, and Pearson correlation analysis were applied to test associations and relationships.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Demographic Distribution

i. Gender: 56% Male, 44% Female
ii. Age: 62% (25–45 years), 38% (46+ years)
iii. Occupation: 38% Civil Servants, 25% Traders, 21% Farmers, 16% Unemployed
iv. Income: 48% earned less than ₦50,000/month

The demographic profile of respondents provides critical context for interpreting the socioeconomic impact of fuel subsidy removal in Nasarawa State. The gender distribution shows a moderate male majority, with 56% of respondents identifying as male and 44% as female. In terms of age, the majority (62%) fell within the economically active bracket of 25–45 years, while the remaining 38% were aged 46 and above. Occupationally, the sample was diverse: civil servants comprised the largest group (38%), followed by traders (25%), farmers (21%), and the unemployed (16%), reflecting a mix of formal, informal, and vulnerable economic sectors. Income data further revealed that nearly half of the respondents (48%) earned less than ₦50,000 per month, indicating a predominantly low-income population that is especially susceptible to policy-induced economic shocks.

Impact Assessment

Variable	Yes (%)	No (%)
Increased Transport Costs	82%	18%
Reduced Food Security	79%	21%
Reduced Healthcare Access	64%	36%
Affected Business Viability	51%	49%

Source: Field Report, 2025.

The impact assessment revealed significant socioeconomic disruptions following the removal of fuel subsidy in Nasarawa State. A substantial majority of respondents (82%) reported increased transport costs, underscoring the direct and immediate consequence of the policy shift. Correspondingly, 79% of respondents experienced reduced food security, indicating a strong linkage between rising transportation expenses and access to affordable nutrition. Additionally, 64% of respondents indicated reduced access to healthcare services, reflecting the policy's effect on affordability and mobility within the health sector. Furthermore, 51% of respondents reported that their business viability was adversely affected, suggesting economic stress among small-scale entrepreneurs and traders. Collectively, these figures highlight the widespread and multidimensional impact of the subsidy removal on household welfare and economic activity in the state.

Chi-Square Analysis

- Transport Cost vs Food Security
  $\chi^2 = 203.14$, df = 1, $p < 0.0001$ → Strong association.

The chi-square analysis revealed a statistically significant association between increased transport costs and household food security status following the removal of fuel subsidy. The test yielded a chi-square value of $\chi^2 = 203.14$ with 1 degree of freedom and a p-value less than 0.0001, indicating a very strong relationship. This suggests that households experiencing higher transport costs were significantly more likely to report reduced food security, highlighting a critical link between fuel-related expenses and access to adequate nutrition in Nasarawa State

Correlation Analysis (Pearson)

	Transport	Food Security	Healthcare	Business
Transport Cost Increase	1.00	0.87	0.67	0.45

Source: SPSS Report, 2025.

The Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to assess the linear relationships between increased transport costs and key socioeconomic indicators such as food security, healthcare access, and business activity. The results showed a very strong positive correlation between transport cost increase and food insecurity ($r = 0.87$), indicating that as transport costs rose, household food security significantly declined. A moderate positive correlation was also observed between transport costs and difficulty in accessing healthcare services ($r = 0.67$), while a weaker yet notable correlation was found between transport costs and business constraints ($r = 0.45$). These findings suggest that increased transportation expenses following fuel subsidy removal have broad and interconnected adverse effects on livelihoods in Nasarawa State.

Interpretation of Results

i. Majority reported increased hardship post-subsidy removal.

ii. Strong correlation between transport cost increase and food insecurity.

iii. Economic strain extended to healthcare and small businesses.

iv. Civil servants and low-income earners reported the highest impact.

The findings reveal a pronounced increase in socioeconomic hardship among residents of Nasarawa State following the removal of fuel subsidies. A substantial majority of respondents reported adverse outcomes across key dimensions of daily life. First, the data highlight a strong and statistically significant correlation between increased transport costs and reduced food security, underscoring the ripple effect of fuel price hikes on household consumption and nutrition. Additionally, economic strain was evident in the health sector, with 64% of respondents indicating reduced access to healthcare services, and 51% noting a decline in business viability, particularly among informal traders and small-scale entrepreneurs. Notably, civil servants and low-income earners groups that form a significant portion of the state's labor force reported the most severe impact. These results collectively point to a broad-based erosion of economic stability and welfare in the aftermath of subsidy removal.

Summary of Findings

The findings suggest that;

i. Fuel subsidy removal has significantly impacted poverty in Nasarawa State.

ii. Key effects include transport cost spikes, reduced food and healthcare access.

iii. Strong associations exist among key poverty indicators.

iv. Vulnerable groups like traders, farmers, and low-income earners are most affected.

Conclusion

The removal of fuel subsidies, while often justified as a necessary step toward long-term fiscal sustainability and economic efficiency, has had profound and immediate socioeconomic repercussions in Nasarawa State. In the short term, the policy has significantly exacerbated poverty levels, particularly among already vulnerable populations. The resultant surge in transportation costs has cascaded into higher food prices, reduced access to healthcare, and a general decline in living standards. Without the simultaneous implementation of robust cushioning policies such as targeted social safety nets, transportation subsidies, or income support measures, the adverse effects of subsidy removal have been disproportionately borne by low-income households. Furthermore, the absence of parallel infrastructure development, including investments in public transport, agricultural supply chains, and rural healthcare access, has intensified the hardship. Consequently, while the long-term goals of subsidy removal may be laudable, the current trajectory underscores the urgent need for deliberate and inclusive mitigation strategies to shield the most affected segments of society.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made;

i. Palliative Measures: Government should implement targeted subsidies for transport and agriculture.

ii. Infrastructure Investment: Improve rural transportation and health access facilities.

iii. Microcredit and SME Support: Expand financial access to affected small businesses.

iv. Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish independent mechanisms to monitor post-reform welfare metrics.

v. Public Communication: Transparency on how savings from subsidy removal are spent will improve public trust.

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