Oil Subsidy Removal and Communication Crisis in Nigeria: Exploring Government Strategies and Alternative Energy Discourse

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Abstract

This article examines the diverse impacts and consequences of Nigeria's oil subsidy removal, highlighting a communication breakdown between the Nigerian government and its citizens, as well as exploring the strategies employed by the government to address this challenge. Through qualitative interviews, the study presents media portrayals, public sentiments, and alternative energy discourses emerging in response to the fuel price hikes, and interviews with stakeholders, including policymakers, energy sector experts, and members of the NLC. Key findings reveal that ineffective communication strategies have exacerbated public mistrust and protest, hindering the government's effort to implement alternative energy solutions and benefits of subsidy removal have not only triggered public dissent but have also prompted widespread strikes, disrupted economic activities and drawn attention to the plight of ordinary citizens facing fuel price hikes. Furthermore, the article highlights the proliferation of alternative energy discourse as citizens seek sustainable solutions upon rising fuel costs.

Keywords: communication, economic implication, fuel, oil and gas, strike, subsidy removal

Introduction

Nigeria is recognised as one of Africa's leading oil-producing nations. The nation heavily depends on the oil revenues to drive its economy, which makes subsidy policies an integral part of government financial strategies. Nigeria is ranked as the sixth largest oil exporter and operates of about One hundred and seventy-three (173) oil blocks (Harrell, 2016). According to the Annual Statistical Bulletin of 2012 by OPEC, records reveal that Nigeria's proven crude oil reserves are approximately 37.2 billion barrels, while natural gas reserves are about 5.154 million cubic meters. Since 1970, oil has been the highest source of foreign exchange, accounting for 63.9 percent and positioning Nigeria as eighth in the world for gas reserves and first in Africa (OPEC, 2013).

Oil was discovered in Ogoni land, Nigeria, in 1956, which currently has approximately fifty-six oil wells and ranks as the fifth largest oil-producing community in River State. The first oil wells, located in Ebubu and Bomu, marked the beginning of exploration activities by multinational companies Shell and Chevron. Crude oil production and export commenced in Nigeria in 1958, accounting for 7.1 percent of total exports by 1961, a period when exports were primarily dominated by cocoa, groundnut, rubber, and palm oil, respectively. In 1965, Nigeria's first oil refinery was established at Alesa Eleme, also situated in Ogoni land (Osaghae, 1995).

As of 1998, the Ijaw of Delta-based clan which is situated in Bayelsa and Nigeria's fourth-largest ethnic group started to organise series of protests, mirroring the grievances being expressed by the Ogoni. Following the unsuccessful negotiations with the Nigerian government over a greater share of the oil revenue and political representation, militant groups emerged and launched several attacks on the energy sector and government officials. Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo-Asari and Ateke Tom emerged as leaders of the first major militant groups in the Niger Delta—the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), respectively—paving the way for the formation of other smaller and independent militias.

As of 2010, the estimation of the proven oil reserve was about 36 billion barrels (Bello & Nwaeke, 2023). Historically, the reserve is estimated to last around 46 years, making it one of the largest in the world. Globally, the Bonny light, popularly known as the Nigeria's low Sulphur oil is highly sought after and in high demand in the North America and European markets annually (Nriagu et al., 2016). Overall, the production and exports levels have been between 1.2 to 2.7 billion barrels per day over the past decade. This shows a significant increase from the all-time low of 200-700 million barrels per day in the preceding period. This improvement was a s result of the amnesty program for militants in the Niger Delta's oil areas which started in 2009.

According to Ozili & Obiora (2023), Nigeria has consistently ranked as Africa's second-largest crude oil producer after Libya, while also holding the eighth position globally in oil exports and the tenth in oil reserves. Yet, despite these substantial earnings from oil production and exportation, many Nigerians remain concerned about the absence of meaningful development and tangible benefits from the nation's oil wealth. Widespread protests have also erupted across various sectors in response to supply shortages and the frequent increases in the prices of refined fuel products.

As of January 2012, the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan declared the removal of fuel subsidies, which led to widespread protest from Nigerians, prominent figures, and opposition parties. This stance was perceived as an added burden, particularly in light of the country's challenges with unemployment, widespread distrust in the government, and ongoing security concerns. The common expectation was that the government would not consider price increase during such difficult times. The media, particularly newspapers, which remain primary source of information for readers across the country, were caught off guard by the government's sudden action. (Osula & Adebisi, 2001).

On December 31, 1990, the threat of nationwide strikes prompted General Ibrahim Babangida's military government to double the minimum wage from N125 ($0.77) to N250 ($1.54) per month (Owoye, 1994). Additionally, in 1993, a strike was triggered by employers' refusal to implement a 45% wage increase for junior public servants. In the same vein, in 2000, labour successfully employed strikes to secure a N7,500 monthly minimum wage. And in 2002, the government agreed to a 25% wage increase due to threatened labour strikes. Following threats of strike action received from the labour unions a month prior to the 2011 elections, the prevailing minimum wage of N18,000 per month—approximately 35% of the initially requested amount was unconditionally approved (Medoye, 2020).

Research Objectives

The objectives outlined below form the basis of this study:

1. To examine the discourse surrounding alternative energy sources, particularly gas, as a sustainable solution in the effect of subsidy removal.
2. To analyse the communication strategies adopted by the Nigerian government surrounding subsidy removal and its effectiveness in managing public response.

Research Questions

In line with the research objectives, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How has the discourse surrounding alternative energy sources, particularly gas, evolved as a sustainable solution in response to oil subsidy removal in Nigeria?
2. What communication strategies did the Nigeria government adopt during the removal of oil subsidy and how effective were these strategies in managing public response?

Literature Review

Oil Subsidies in Nigeria

The Nigerian economy has been subsidised from multifaceted support measures for many years which includes fuel, agricultural, education, electricity, health, exchange rate and so on. In Nigeria, fuel subsidies were initially introduced in the 1970s and later formalised during President Obasanjo's administration in 1977 through the enactment of the Price Control Act, which prohibited the sale of certain goods—including fuel—at prices above government-regulated levels (PwC Nigeria, 2022). The same administration also reviewed and increased in the pump price of fuel, moving from 4 kobo to 15.37 kobo. Since then, the price of petroleum products has been adjusted twenty times in the 33 years (Ibrahim and Unom, 2011:3). With the pump price of N97, the government is still keen on embarking on further withdrawal to completely phase out subsidy. Although Nigeria sells petroleum products higher than any other major player in the oil industry. The table 1 below reveals that only four developing Nations like United Arab Emirate, Iraq, Kuwait, and Venezuela produce crude oil more than Nigeria. Yet, the price of petroleum in Nigeria is higher than any of the other twelve major petroleum producing nations surveyed.

Despite the fact that Nigeria sells petroleum products at a high rate among other oil producing nations as seen in the above table, it has failed to invest on basic infrastructure to justify the high revenues collected from domestic buyers. It could be stated that corruption appears to be rampant in the most oil producing nations. The country scores 25% by occupying the one hundred and forty-four (144) position out of one hundred and seventy-seven (177) in the Transparency International corruption perception index for 2013 (Akinola, 2018).

Past administrations have made several attempts to remove the fuel subsidy; for instance, President Olusegun Obasanjo's attempt in 2000 was met with protests to remove fuel subsidy. Likewise, Goodluck Jonathan's announcement of the subsidy removal in 2012 also was marred by significant opposition from the labour unions. In January 2012, the Federal Government officially declared the removal of subsidies, projecting annual savings of approximately N1.3 trillion. These funds were earmarked for reinvestment in critical sectors, which includes infrastructure development, with a focus on enhancing downstream operations (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2014).

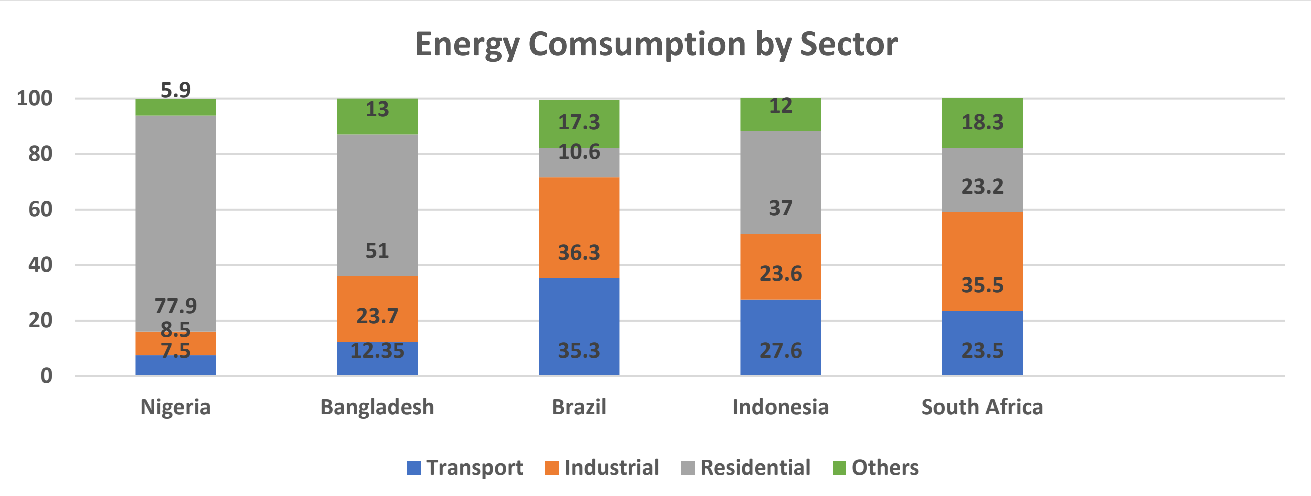
Similarly, fuel subsidies in Nigeria enjoyed widespread support among ordinary citizens, who saw them as one of the few tangible benefits provided by the government—even though, in reality, fuel was often unavailable at the official regulated price across the country. Moreover, previous attempts to reform subsidies had faced strong opposition from influential political constituents, like trade unions. These unions have historically been instrumental in organising protests against fuel subsidy removals since the mid-1980s, notably the large-scale 'Occupy Nigeria' protest in 2012 (Ikenga, A. Francis & Oluka, N. Lucas, 2023). The demonstrations stemmed from the trade unions widely held belief that the fuel subsidy constituted a component of Nigeria's social contract (Houeland, 2022). While the government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) contended that the subsidy removal was crucial for addressing corruption, but protesters in Lagos conveyed the widespread conviction that targeting a public benefit instead of pursuing corrupt officials was unjust, as evidenced by signposts and T-shirts stating, 'Kill corruption, not Nigerians' (Houeland, 2022).

In 2021, the federal government's proposal to remove fuel subsidies in 2022 sparked varied public responses. According to Flamini, V., & Sears, L. (2015), oil subsidies present both advantages (pros) and disadvantages (cons) for the economy. Additional research suggests that fuel subsidies in Nigeria may lead to inflation and reduce the economic welfare and well-being of the citizens (Adenikinju, 2009). In countries like Nigeria, fuel subsidies are perceived as a key element of the implicit social contract between the government and its citizens (Fattouh et al., 2016; Moerenhout et al., 2017). According to Moerenhout (2020), the elimination or removal of fuel subsidies without improvements to social welfare programs can be seen as a unilateral change in social welfare contract, potentially resulting in social unrest, political turmoil, public unrest, as well as demonstrations (protest). Nevertheless, the removal of fuel subsidies remains a contentious issue due to the perception that they provide a form of assistance, making fuel more accessible to low-income populations.

Furthermore, government revenue collections declined sharply during periods of strikes. The halt in commercial activities led to reduced tax revenues, affecting the government's capacity to fund public services and infrastructure projects. The strikes also resulted in delays and cancellations of investments, further stalling economic growth. In addition to economic losses, social and political repercussions ensued, with some strikes being declared illegal by courts and the government implementing measures to cushion the economic shocks, such as establishing palliatives and grants.

According to (Linzenich et al., 2020), there has been a growing emphasis on communication, trust, and risk perception in various sectors, particularly regarding energy. Risk perception, risk communication and trust are all strong factors in addressing general concerns and societal perception which surround the removal of oil subsidy. Oil subsidy removal is a complex and contentious issue that impacts various stakeholders, including consumers, policymakers, and energy providers. Risk communication, risk perception, and trust are all critical factors in addressing public concerns and perceptions surrounding the removal of electricity subsidies. Electric subsidy removal is a complex and contentious issue that impacts various stakeholders, including consumers, policymakers, and energy providers.

Table 1: Energy use by their Sector



Source: GIZ (2015)

The Failure of Fuel Subsidy Removal in Nigeria: A Reflection of Broader Challenges in Development Policy

For over five decades, the Nigerian government has been striving to formulate effective policies for sustainable development and national progress. Essentially, public policies serve as critical frameworks that guide governmental actions in modern nations. Both developed and developing nations formulate policies aimed at achieving state objectives, enhancing individual well-being, and promoting overall societal development. A policy can be defined as a decision-making process for institutions and organisations. This entails identifying different options, such as programs or spending priorities, and choosing among them based on expected results (Alumona & Odigbo, 2016).

Despite the crucial role of state policies in promoting development, Nigeria's benefits from various governmental policies and programs have appeared limited or less than optimal. For example, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), launched in 1972, aimed to increase domestic food production by involving citizens and encouraging self-sufficiency and sustainability. According to Iwuchukwu & Igbokwe (2012), the ineffectiveness of the so-called Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) program was largely due to the preferential allocation of resources to government agencies and officials, while marginalising less privileged farmers—the actual producers of food.

The preceding analysis reveals that most Nigerian policies have been either failed or unsuccessful due to reflection of external agenda, were implemented in a top-down manner, poor articulation or completely excluded the intended audience. Policies such as the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) 2004, Roll Back Malaria 2001, the Nigerian Agricultural Insurance Corporation of 1987, the Green Revolution of 1979, and the Millennium Development Goals, despite their significant relevance, failed to effectively tackle the issues that prompted their adoption and implementation. In most cases, these policies and programs are either abandoned, left unimplemented, or discarded due to inherent flaws or deliberate sabotage (Obamwonyi & Aibieyi, 2014).

Table 2: Overview of Petrol Price Adjustments in Nigeria from 1978 to Present

Date	Presidency and System of Governance	Price (K/₦)	Percentage Change/Increase (%)
1978	Gen Olusegun Obasanjo (Military)	15.37 k	-
1982	Alh Shehu Shagari (Democratic)	20 k	30
1990	Gen Ibrahim Babangida (Military)	60 k	200
1992	Gen Ibrahim Babangida (Military)	70 k	17
1992	Gen Ibrahim Babangida (Military)	3.25	364
1993	Gen Ibrahim Babangida (Military)	5	54
1994	Chief Ernest Shonekan (Interim)	11	20
1994-1998	Gen Sani Abacha (Military)	11	0
2000	Olusegun Obasanjo (Democratic)	20	82
2000	Olusegun Obasanjo (Democratic)	22	10
2001	Olusegun Obasanjo (Democratic)	25	14
2003	Olusegun Obasanjo (Democratic)	40	60
2004	Olusegun Obasanjo (Democratic)	45	12.5
2007	Olusegun Obasanjo (Democratic)	70	55.6
2007	Alh Umaru Yaradua (Democratic)	65	0.7
2012	Dr Goodluck Jonathan (Democratic)	141	116.9
2012	Dr Goodluck Jonathan (Democratic)	97	0.31
2015	Dr Goodluck Jonathan (Democratic)	87	-10.31
2016	Muhammadu Buhari (Democratic)	145	66.67
2022	Muhammadu Buhari (Democratic)	195	124
2023	Bola Ahmed Tinubu (Democratic)	557	185.13
2023	Bola Ahmed Tinubu (Democratic)	617	10.76

Source: Communique by South-South Elders and Leaders 2012; updated by the author

Deregulation of Nigeria's Downstream Oil Sector: Rationale, Debates, and Historical Context

Deregulation encompasses a plethora of integral components, including privatisation, removal of price control, typically the elimination of barriers to private investors' involvement in the production, supply, and distribution of goods and services. According to Bankole (2001), a regulated market may inadvertently encourage shortages, hoarding, and the existence of black markets in the economy. Deregulation is often used interchangeably with liberalisation, with the latter defined by the British Council Programme and sector as a strategy that promotes policy and institutional changes. These changes aim to emancipate internal and external markets for goods and services, thereby improving market efficiency, restructuring enterprises, distortions, correcting markets, and institutions in public, as well as improving public revenue and expenditure planning and management (Bankole, 2001).

Deregulation facilitates laissez-faire enterprises and services to be operated with minimal regulatory encumbrances. For research purposes, deregulation refers to the partial or total removal of government controls over the allocation and production of goods and services. A key question to consider is whether Nigeria gains from deregulation or purported benefits of deregulation in Nigeria? Addressing this question requires understanding the theoretical foundation of deregulation. The deregulation of the oil sector in Nigeria is a particularly controversial topic, sparkling intense polemics between its proponents and detractors.

The proponents posit that liberalising and deregulating the downstream sector of the petroleum industry would ultimately actualise the goal of alleviating persistent fuel shortages and maintaining a sustainable fuel supply throughout the polity. Furthermore, it is asserted that sector liberalisation and deregulation would catalyse foreign investments, by reducing petroleum product smuggling, and enhance overall sector efficiency. Additionally, the study suggests that deregulation would enable the government to channel funds to other sectors of the economy, promoting economic diversification, given that Nigeria's petroleum products used to be among the cheapest in the world. Moreover, for, Onyishi et al., (2012) the protagonists contend that deregulation would break the monopoly of fuel supply by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). Given the inoperability of the refineries, the liberalisation and deregulation would enable either stakeholder, including major and independent marketers, to import and market products, thereby promoting competition and market contestability (Onyishi et al., 2012).

Given that NNPC lacked the capacity to import enough petroleum products to meet the nation's needs, along with the persistent issues of refineries malfunctions, it has been suggested that the government should stop the Petroleum Support Fund (PEF). This fund is used to cover the additional costs incurred by marketers for importing and selling petrol at a regulated price and distributing it across the country. The major proponents for this change include the Federal Government, the Presidential Steering Committee on the Global Financial Crisis, and the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG). The antagonists (detractors) on the other hand, believe that the Nigeria petroleum industry should not be subjected to total liberalisation, deregulation, or privatisation, for whatever reason and that the status quo should remain, maybe with minor adjustment to enhance efficiency, purportedly in the broader national interest (Onyishi et al., 2012).

The review of this study shows Nigeria's state-owned refineries and petrochemical plants in Kaduna, Warri, and Port Harcourt, highlighting their suboptimal capacity utilisation, addresses the neglected state, recurrent vandalisation of the state-run petroleum product pipelines and oil movement infrastructure nationwide, pernicious effects of institutionalised corrupt practices, and the rise of oil oligarchs and oil mafia, orchestrating crude oil theft and pipeline sabotage (locally called illegal bunkering), the ubiquity of corrupt practices by their owned Task Force operatives assisting cross-border smuggling of petroleum products in large-scale, diversions of both crude oil and petroleum products. These issues are the root causes of the persistent fuel crises that have plagued the nation for nearly a decade, are all government's predictable outcomes in terms of active participation in Nigeria's downstream petroleum industry, which has precipitated a paradigmatic shift in the sector's dynamics. Finally, they aver that deregulation would catalyse an increase in profit margin for the importers, thereby fostering a more efficient market mechanism. This perspective is espoused by the organised civil society and the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC).

The government-established agency named, Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA) by her duty, was unable to effectively monitor market trends, thus failing to provide

Nigerians with current data from the international oil market. Approaching 2011 final quarter, Mallam Adamu Ciroma, who was then the Minister of Finance, had assured the Nigerian populace during the 2002 budget preparations that the Federal Government had decided to exempt petroleum products sold at filling stations from taxation at existing prices. At this time, there was a N3.00 tax on PMS and its subsequent removal in two tranches (N1.50/N1.50) to allow the price adjustments to hold is why till the present the product has no tax component. Moreover, this assurance was fully contradicted by PPPRA's actions, when Chief Rasheed Gbadamosi led the agency with an increase in petrol prices from N22 to N26 per litre, marking an 18.2 percent increase before the 2002 budget's approval. Chief Gbadamosi insisted that this slight price adjustment indicated the commencement of downstream oil sector deregulation, suggesting quarterly fuel price reviews. Chief Gbadamosi concluded that market liberalisation and deregulation is an economic policy aimed to emancipate the downstream sector from government's control and restrictions, fostering the market-driven dynamics (Okpaga et al., 2012).

On June 16, 2002, the PPPRA proposal gained full acceptance, thereby leading to an increase in fuel prices from N22 to N26, which instigated a labour strike and were later charged to court. The government's underlying assumption was perhaps to break NNPC's monopoly in the oil sector, with the primary aim of augmenting oil revenue. However, the government seemingly overlooked the timing and potential repercussions of this decision. Approximately one year later, petrol prices were further raised from N26 to N40 per liter. The labour strike that commenced on June 30, 2003, was suspended on July 8 following a government-approved reduction of fuel price to N34 per litre. On June 9, 2004, the price of petrol increased from N34 to N50 per litre, which also triggered another strike action. Subsequently, the Federal High Court in Abuja ordered a reversal of the previous price of N34 per litre. Eventually, N42 per litre was reached by the government and the NLC as an agreement for the new price (Ikenga, A. Francis & Oluka, N. Lucas, 2023).

Table 3: Fuel Subsidy Strike Actions between 2000 and 2016 (Compiled by the Authors)

Date	Cause of Strike Action	Duration of Strike	Resolution Made by Government
1st of June, 2000	Petrol prices increased from N11 per litre to N30	8 days	Price of petrol reduced to N20 per litre
16th of June, 2002	Petrol prices increased from N20 per litre to N26	2 days	Price of petrol remained at N26 per litre
30th of June- 8th of July, 2003	Petrol prices increased from N26 per litre to N40	8 days	Price of petrol reduced to N34 per litre
9th of June, 2004	Petrol prices increased from N34 per litre to N50	3 days	Govt. and NLC agreed on a new price of N42 per litre
11th of October, 2004	Petrol prices increased from N11 per litre to N30	3 days	Government appointed 19-member committee on palliatives
September, 2005	Petrol prices increased from N11 per litre to N30	No strike	Protests led to a price cut
20th of June, 2007	Petrol prices increased from N65 per litre to N70	4 days	Price of petrol reduced to N65 per litre
1st of January, 2012	Petrol prices increased from N65 per litre to N141	8 days	Price of petrol reduced to N97 per litre
18th of May, 2016	67% spike in prices	4 days	Government expressed readiness to return to the negotiation table.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Framing theory, originally developed by Goffman in 1974. According to Goffman, framing a communication message or text involves aspects of a perceived reality and makes them more prominent in a way that endorses moral evaluation, casual interpretation, and a specific definition of the issue (Asemah et al., 2022). This means that the presentation of information significantly affects how an audience receives, interprets, and perceives it. According to Littlejohn and Foss (2008), framing theory is seen as a second-tier form of agenda-setting, as it purports not only to shape the audience's focus or what to think about (agenda setting) but also to prescribe the manner in which an issue should be considered (second level agenda setting, framing theory).

Littlejohn and Foss (2008), identify two methodological approaches to framing in communication research: individual and media frames. Individual framing refers to the cognitive interpretation of a situation, while media framing involves using language, visuals, and style to communicate a particular issue. This framework can also analyse how media outlets report on and manage conflicts (Apeloko & Olajide, 2017). The theory also explains the ability of the media to persuade the audience to accept a particular meaning of a situation more than the other (McQuail, 2005).

Wicks (2005) asserts that framing involves more than just raising specific issues; it provides a comprehensive outline for how these issues are presented and interpreted by the public. Asemah et al., (2022) revealed that framing plays a crucial role in shaping the audience's perception and knowledge of economic, political and social issues. Framing theory allows media researchers to investigate the representation of media in shaping the perception of the public and influence in policy debates. This theory also enables media researchers to examine the imagery, themes, language, and tone used by selected newspapers, along with their impact on public understanding, reception, and perception. In the context of this research, the theory is relevant in analysing media coverage of significant events, such as the removal of fuel subsidy policy in Nigeria through the selected presentation of information. With the use of frame theory, this study examines the editorial format, story sources, frame typologies, frame tones and types employed by Daily Trust, The Guardian and The Punch in reporting 2023 removal of fuel subsidy policy in Nigeria.

Materials and Method

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate oil subsidy removal and communication crisis in Nigeria: exploring government strategies and alternative energy discourse. Since the core aim is to analyse the public discourse, media portrayals and framing of issues surrounding subsidy removal, the content analysis allows the systematic examination of government statements, public reactions and media reports, while the discourse analysis provides insights into power dynamics, underlying themes and framing devices. As described by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research provided an ideal framework as it enables comprehensive studies of complex phenomena which naturally occur in their environments. Qualitative research suits the study of oil subsidy removal and communication crisis since it offers flexibility to discover new themes while developing comprehensive descriptions about this phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researcher used purposive sampling to select 15 participants as a suitable number per qualitative research guidelines. According to Guest et al., (2006), this method helps to reach theoretical saturation while keeping analysis depth achievable.

The study used the following criteria to select participants:

1. Those who have demonstrated deep insights or knowledge of government communication strategies or alternative energy discourse.
2. Direct impact or current involvement in the oil and gas industry, oil subsidy removal policy and its aftermath.
3. Those who are willing to provide in-depth information through semi-structured interviews.
4. Professional experience or established role in labour unions, media, civil society, government or within the energy sector.

The final sample consists of participants from different sectors/ industries, reflecting the complex nature of the issue: energy sector (3 participants), policymakers and government officials (3 participants), media professionals (3 participants), Civil Society Organisation (CSO) leaders/advocates (3 participants), labour union representatives (3 participants) from the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC). This broad representation allowed for a multi-dimensional understanding of the communication crisis and the evolving discourse. As noted in the methodology, the study follows Creswell and Poth's

(2018) framework, which advocates for purposive sampling with a manageable number of participants that can provide rich, detailed data without compromising depth.

Analysis and Results

Research Question 1: How has the discourse surrounding Alternative Energy Sources, Particularly Gas, evolved as a sustainable solution in response to Oil Subsidy Removal in Nigeria?

The analysis of the interview data revealed that several key themes pertaining to the evolution of alternative energy discourse in Nigeria, particularly emphasising gas as a sustainable solution following to the removal of oil subsidy. The identified themes demonstrate the state's current alternative energy discussions in Nigeria's media environment and the various elements that had influenced public discourse.

Emerging Alternative Energy Narratives

The discourse around alternative energy sources, particularly natural gas, in Nigeria has increasingly recognised its potential as a sustainable solution amid the post-removal of oil subsidies. The promotion of gas as a viable alternative to petroleum products emerged as the most prominent narrative within government communications, with seven out of ten academic writers interviewed emphasising this transition (Dongo & Relvas, 2025). Different types of stakeholders, and news outlets, have adopted distinct approaches regarding alternative energy discussions. An academic writer and news writer and Union representative explained their strategies:

"The decision has complex implications, notably affecting the LPG (Liquefied Petroleum Gas) industry. The removal of fuel subsidies is likely to generate both positive and negative impacts for the LPG sector in Nigeria. As fuel prices increase following subsidy withdrawal, consumers may turn to alternative energy sources, with LPG emerging as a feasible option. To accommodate this surge, significant investments in LPG infrastructure—such as terminals, storage facilities, bottling plants, and distribution networks—will be essential."

"Private sector participation and foreign investments could play a significant role in developing the necessary infrastructure and enhancing the competitiveness of the LPG industry. The removal of fuel subsidies provides an opportunity for the Nigerian government to introduce comprehensive policy reforms that prioritise the development and growth of the LPG industry. Strengthening regulatory frameworks, establishing safety standards, and implementing incentives for market participants can stimulate long-term investments and ensure a sustainable and thriving LPG sector." (Academic writer and Energy blogger).

The results of the cost-benefit analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis suggest a preference for renewable technologies, as the data indicates a greater net benefit from the renewable technologies. According to Participant 5, these statements reflect their current approach:

"It is important at this stage to note that from a supply point of view gas remains a substantial energy source for Nigeria. However, the analysis so far shows that from a cost and benefit point of view, hydro, wind and solar sources are the most competitive and viable options amongst the available energy sources. This has important implications for energy policy making and efforts to enhance energy access in Nigeria (sic)." (CSO Representative, Interview).

"The country's current energy portfolio can supply reliable and consistent energy to only about half of the population, leaving the other half without adequate access. This analysis of the energy portfolio highlights the need to identify the most competitive and viable energy sources available to expand energy access at this critical stage.”

In addition, Civil society organisations displayed varying levels of engagement with alternative energy discourse, which was generally supported. As one national representative stated:

“Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) constitutes approximately 97% of the final energy demand in the ETX scenario, primarily due to its lower cost and carbon content compared to other petroleum products such as diesel and gasoline. To promote the adoption of cleaner transport systems among Nigerians, the government could subsidise the prices of cleaner transport fuels like CNG and biofuels and reduce import duties on fuel-efficient vehicles. These incentives would encourage a shift towards more environmentally friendly transportation options” (Participant 14, Environmental Advocate).

Evolution of Media Framing

The analysis showed a significant shift on how alternative energy, gas in particular, was framed across the study period. For the first month of the subsidy removal, 12% of articles mentioned alternative energy solutions, with economic hardship frames dominating coverage (68%). By the 6th month of the study period, alternative energy discourse solutions already appeared in 37% of articles, with gas clearly mentioned in 28% of all coverage.

The media tone also evolved, while early mentions of alternative energy that was often framed doubtfully, in the same line showed more balance treatment. A journalist from the Daily Trust explained:

“In the first instance, claims about government gas alternatives were treated with serious sketicism with immediate economic pains experienced by public. However, as infrastructure development and concrete policies emerged, overall reporting evolved to include more analysis of these alternatives.” (Participant 11, Energy Reporter).

Technical and Infrastructure Considerations

The discourse surrounding alternative energy showed a major attention to infrastructure requirements and technical feasibility. The alternative energy, especially gas utilisation, was a strategy to make subsidy and sector deregulation policy achievable. Infrastructure limitations were identified as the primary barrier to alternative energy adoption, especially for gas utilisation. As explained below:

“Although Nigeria ranks among the world’s top 10 natural gas producers, gas production has been limited over the years due to inadequate infrastructure to utilise the large volumes of gas currently flared, frequent pipeline sabotage, vehicle performance and maintenance issues, and common supply disruptions within the country’s natural gas industry. Also, there is the need for more CNG conversion centers, pipeline distribution networks, and last-mile connectivity solutions. This indicates a more sophisticated understanding of what energy transition really requires." (Participant 10, Energy Analyst).

Research Question 2: What communication strategies did the Nigerian government adopt during the removal of oil subsidy and how effective were these strategies in managing public response?

The oil subsidy removal which happened during the administrations of President Jonathan in 2012 and President Tinubu in 2023 has consistently triggered major public outcry and communication crises. This section examines the communication strategies used by the

Nigerian government at the time of the hullabaloo and analyses their effectiveness in managing public response, drawing insights from qualitative data with documentary evidence and stakeholders.

Public Announcements and Speeches

The communication of oil subsidy removal in both 2012 and 2023 were through high-level public announcements which was delivered by the minister and president respectively. In January 2012, the administration of President Jonathan announced subsidy removal on New Year's Day, this timing was massively described as insensitive by the masses and designed to catch the public off guard. In addition, the government charged the sectorial principal officers such as the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Lamido Sanusi, Minister of Finance, Okonjo Iweala, Group General Manager, NNPC, Steve Oniwon, Executive Secretary PPPRA, Reginald Stanley among several others to engage the various stakeholders in robust public discourse and information sharing nationwide. After several attempts, President Tinubu in his May 2023 inaugural address instantly declared the removal of oil subsidy "*fuel subsidy is gone*", creating a dramatic and sudden shift in policy.

Qualitative interviews show that the scope, timing and frequency of these announcements and public engagements adversely impacted public reception. A public expert explained: "the announcement of the 2012 subsidy after holidays created a sudden anger and shock. It was like as a policy forced upon the people without prior discussion." (Media owner/journalist, interview). This sentiment was repeated in 2023, during the inaugural declaration which left little room for public preparatory communication or digestion.

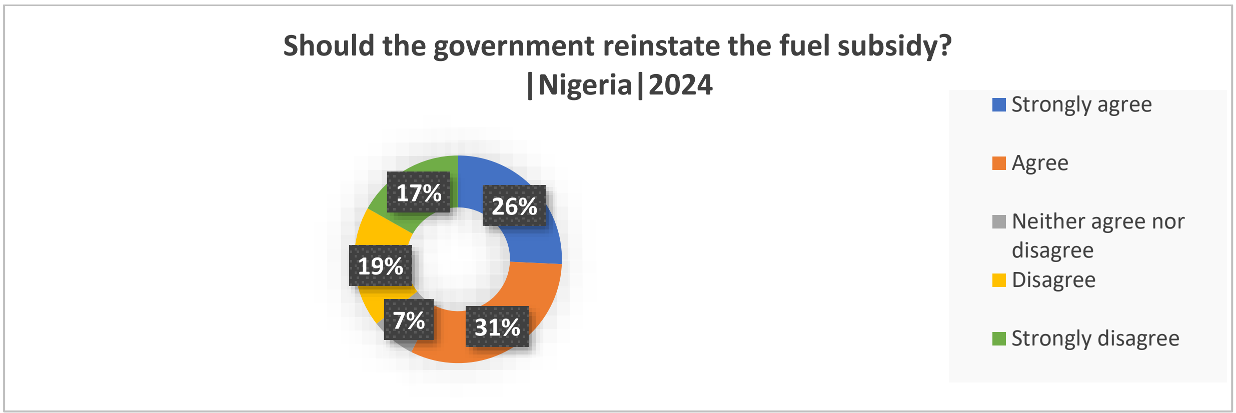
"Taking a cue from a neighboring country, Ghana eliminated fuel subsidies in 2013, resulting in petrol, kerosene, diesel, and LPG prices rising between 15% and 50% until market levels were reached by mid-September. The government directed the savings from subsidy removal toward essential sectors" (Political analyst, interview).

"The key to gaining the public's trust is for the government to be transparent and accountable for the money saved by removing subsidies. This is a necessary step towards a more sustainable and prosperous future. This can be accomplished by demonstrating that the funds previously allocated to petroleum subsidies are now invested in directly beneficial public goods and services such as healthcare, education and infrastructure." (NLC Representative, interview).

Several attempts at direct engagement platforms were created after the public pandemonium and protests had begun, rather than a proactive measure. A labour representative noted: "They only come to the table to dialogue when we are already on the street. If there was going to be a genuine engagement before the announcement, possibly the trust deficit would not be so that high. This interactive method would have fostered transparency and credibility in the execution of governmental policies. Many Nigerians in vulnerable situations were already experiencing considerable financial hardship. In addition to elevated levels of joblessness and impoverishment, escalating prices were exerting substantial pressure" (NLC Representative, interview).

"As an economist with over forty years of experience studying the Nigerian economy, I understand why the fuel subsidy had to be removed. As I previously argued in an article, fuel subsidies were detrimental to Nigeria's economy. They exacerbated budget deficits and increased the country's debt burden, fostered corruption, and diverted resources from vital sectors of the economy. Furthermore, they were unfair, effectively transferring national wealth to the elite. This would have provided a soft landing, and gradually exposed Nigerians to the full market price of fuel. Doing so in one fell swoop amounts to shock therapy that is very traumatic for an already beleaguered and impoverished citizenry." (Economist/Public Analyst, interview).

Table 4: Should fuel subsidies be reintroduced by the government?



Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The Nigeria government should reinstate fuel subsidies even if this means reducing other important expenditures such as health or education?

The table above further justifies the results obtained from Interviewees (political analysts, economists, NLC representatives), indicating that the public strongly supports the reinstatement of oil subsidies in Nigeria. The debate whether the current administration should reinstate the fuel subsidy in 2024 is a contentious issue, as indicated in the table. The data shows polarised public opinion, while thirty-one percent (31%) agree and twenty-six percent (26%) strongly agree that subsidies should be returned unconditionally, this shows major concerns over rising fuel costs and their impact on the daily life of common citizens. In addition, with nineteen percent (19%) disagreeing and seventeen percent (17%) strongly disagreeing, citing the financial burden on the government and potential economic inefficiencies. The smallest group, seven percent (7%), indicates neither positive nor negative (neutral), which reveals a lack of consensus among Nigerian citizens. This division underscores the complex economic and social factors at play, with many citizens feeling the pinch of subsidy removal while others advocate for fiscal responsibility.

Palliative Measures

Public communication about proposed mitigation or palliatives measures was a recurring theme. In the year 2012, the government announced a "SURE-P" program (Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme) which was aimed at channeling subsidy savings into social welfare programs and infrastructure projects. Similarly, in 2023, discussions quickly pivoted into investments in CNG infrastructure, transport allowances and cash transfer.

Moreover, the communication centred around the palliatives always lacked concrete details and clear timelines. A general citizen noted: "I think what Nigerians are looking for is relief in transportation facilities. Nigerians are looking for relief in the area where potential services like electricity are stable, places where they can invest in food productions, areas where they can get relief in terms of healthcare. There are no frameworks on how to identify the vulnerable. Also, the mechanism for sharing the money is also not in place." (General Public/Citizen, Interview).

Comments from various stakeholder had also been noted that the idea of the palliative itself is not bad, but experience has shown that it's difficult to make a success of a conditional cash transfer.

A representative from CSO identified inflation pressure on the amount proposed and the potential of those involved in the distribution of the money to be transparent and accountable, as issues that could hinder the intentions of the policy.

"Once you remove the subsidy, you expect naturally that prices would go up, whether as a result of market forces or because of the need to balance things up on the part of commodity sellers, particularly in the transportation sector as well as the consumable sector. The amount that is going to be given to those who need it and who must be seen to be needing it must be substantial, maybe like what an average worker receives as minimum wage, that will be a better way of giving them what in other countries is called cost of living crisis bail out. Maybe like N30,000 and you can do that for six months or one year, but it must be transparent. One of the ways to maintain transparency and accountability is to decentralise the process. We have 774 Local Councils; the government at that level should manage the fund" (CSO Representative, Interview).

Dissent and Protests

There is an obvious interrelation between the perceived inadequacy of communication strategies and the duration, level, and intensity of civil unrest, strikes and public protests. Both 2012 "Occupy Nigeria" protests and the widespread industrial actions and economic disruptions in 2023 are seen as strong evidence. The communication crisis directly triggered dissent, as frustrated Nigerians felt unrepresented. The strikes, in turn, significantly disrupted economic activities, showcasing the government's inability to manage the public backlash effectively.

Discussion of Results

This study investigates the multifaceted effects and implications of oil subsidy removal in Nigeria, which specifically explored the government's strategies to navigate the challenge, the communication crisis between citizens and the government, and the emery discourse surrounding the alternative energy. The qualitative of media portrayals, interviews, and public sentiments have yielded significant insights, which had shredded ore light on the complex interplay pf communication, policy, and public perception in a critical economic reform. The findings in same light, reveal that the policy shift, enacted during the administration of President Jonathan in 2012 and President Tinubu in 2023, elicited significant public dissent largely fueled by ineffective communication strategies and perceived insensitivity in announcement content and timing.

The findings reveal that the policy shift, enacted during the administrations of President Jonathan in 2012 and President Tinubu in 2023, elicited significant public dissent largely fuelled by ineffective communication strategies and perceived insensitivity in announcement timing and content. The discussions are based on the two research questions drawn up for the study. The first research question reveals a discernible evolution in the discourse surrounding alternative energy sources in natural gas, in the wake of oil subsidy removal. Back to subsidy removal, discussions around alternative energy were often academic; moreover, the profound and immediate impact of fuel price hikes catalysed an urgent and widespread public and governmental focus on viable alternatives. From the results, it was revealed that "Gas as a transition fuel" narrative as the most outstanding emerging theme.

This equally make the finding align with global energy transition trends which really position natural gas as a bridge fuel, but it takes on urgency in Nigeria due to domestic availability of gas reserves and the immediate necessity imposed by subsidy removal. The intensity on

Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), as highlighted by academic writers and energy experts, shows a pragmatic shift towards readily deployable solutions, rather than a sole focus on long term renewable energy sources like solar and wind. This urgency pivot accentuates the crisis-driven nature of the discourse, which prioritises the readily accessible alternatives to petrol to cushion economic shocks. The increase in public awareness and the demand for alternatives is a significant outcome, while fuel increase, which causes economic burden has evidently forced ordinary citizens to actively seek out and discuss energy options that were previously less considered.

However, the study observed policy alignment and government initiatives with alternative energy, which also suggest a top-down response to the public's need and the economic imperative. Prior to government's inability to give clarity regarding the removal of subsidies, there is an observable attempt to frame gas expansion programs as a direct benefit and solution, in order to gain public trust. Furthermore, the findings also reveal major barriers and challenges to alternative energy adoption currently facing, including financial accessibility, infrastructural deficits, and logistical hurdles. This gap between the practical implementation and emerging discourse shows a critical point of friction. As the idea of alternative energy is gaining traction in government rhetoric and public sphere, the reality of its adoption is being thwarted by systemic issues. This divergence emphasises a potential area for future communication strategies: always ensure clearly communicating plans for infrastructure development, accessibility and financing.

The second research question analysed the communication strategies which the Nigerian government adopted during the oil subsidy removal reveals a profound communication crisis, which primarily stemmed from sporadic, ineffective, and largely reactive approaches. This also aligns with the findings from Linzenich et al. (2020) which talks about the critical importance of trust, risk, and communication perception in energy sector reforms. The pervasive general widespread protest and public mistrust, as detailed in the abstract, are direct effects of these strategic shortcomings.

The government's attempts in the justification framing for the subsidy removal, though present, massively failed to resonate with the public. Arguments which were centered around anti-corruption and economic sustainability (e.g., "benefited corrupt middlemen") were overshadowed by the immediate and severe economic hardship faced by their citizens. This underscores a fundamental miscalibration in Framing Theory application, in which the government's desired frame "economic necessity" clashed with the public's dominant frame "hardship and injustice". This also aligns with Houeland's (2020) observation that protesters prioritised "Kill corruption, not Nigerians," which reflects a perception that the government prioritises economic abstractions over tangible general welfare.

Moreover, the communication regards hardship mitigation and palliative measures was perceived as lacking credibility or insufficient. This critical aspect of crisis communication, that was aimed in providing tangible empathy and relief, was evidently undermined by inconsistencies and a failure to deliver immediate, visible benefits. The historical context of unfulfilled promises due to corrupt practices and the recurrent nature of strike actions against previous price increases (as showed in Table 3) highlight a deep-seated public scepticism. As Bankole (2001) posits, public policies devoid of proper mobilisation are often met with suspicion and antagonism, a phenomenon clear in this case.

The government's communication approach was significantly reactive rather than proactive, a detrimental posture in crisis management. The swift and sudden declaration of subsidy removal without sufficient pre-emptive dialogue or a clear communication road-map. (Van Der Waldt, 2024), implies this rapid action allowed misinformation and public anger to proliferate unchecked. The study's findings reflect a lack of genuine stakeholder engagement and dialogue, where critical groups like labour unions felt their utmost concerns were not genuinely taken into consideration, leading to their active mobilisation of strikes and protests, as they have historically done (Houeland, 2022).

Conclusion

This research set out to critically assess the intersection of oil subsidy removal, government communication strategies, and the resulting public discourse in Nigeria. It also sought to examine the extent to which alternative energy narratives were integrated into the government's messaging around the policy shift.

From the analysis, it posited that the removal of subsidies has become a global concern due to the substantial financial obligations and burdens it imposes on nation states. It was also observed that some states continue to subsidise specific commodities, particularly those with elevated prices that could disadvantage the masses. This aims to bridge the gap or the disparity between the poor and the rich. However, it is our contention that the rentier character of the Nigerian state constitutes a significant impediment to effective public policy implementation. The widespread incompetence that has characterised leadership echelons over the years, coupled with pervasive corruption, has engendered public skepticism, leading to the treatment of every governmental policy initiative with distrust.

While the elimination of fuel subsidies has some potential benefits, it is crucial to acknowledge the associated drawbacks. The government must meticulously examine the impact of subsidy removal and implement strategies to alleviate any adverse consequences. Effective palliative should be a proactive step towards mitigating the impact of this policy shift. In the case of Nigeria, the multiple and higher funding of the federating units in Nigeria such as the 36 states, FCT and the 774 local government areas is a consequence of this policy. Moreover, it is germane to implement more measures in other to ensure that society is sufficiently equipped to navigate the complexities that arise from this policy change. The primary objective should be to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between fostering economic growth and development and to ensure that Nigerians have access to affordable and sustainable fuel sources, which in turn promote socioeconomic equity and inclusiveness. The citizenry, since they are keen on Nigeria's oil endowment management, could go a step further to become pressure groups that will demand transparency, accountability and good governance at all levels.

The successful reform of energy consumption subsidies therefore hinges on first strengthening trust in the government, particularly its willingness and capacity to reallocate or repurpose fiscal savings. Additionally, effective fossil fuel subsidy reform may depend on advancing a more inclusive political framework that empowers marginalised groups, enhancing their ability to influence decision-making and ensuring equitable resource distribution. In the case of Nigeria—like other oil and gas-producing nations—the timing and structure of climate-related initiatives are critical to achieving a just transition, as the fossil fuel sector is deeply intertwined with the nation's economic conditions, political dynamics, and power relations.

The focal point should be on finding a solution that strikes a judicious balance between the imperative of economic growth and development, and the need to ensure that Nigerians have access to affordable and sustainable fuel, especially solar and gas, thereby fostering socioeconomic equity and inclusiveness.

The findings also reveal that oil subsidy removal in Nigeria, while potentially justified on economic grounds, was implemented through a flawed and top-down communication strategy which failed to persuade or engage the public. Government messages were opaque, sporadic, and largely reactive, creating an environment of misinformation, confusion, and public resentment. The inadequacy of participatory dialogue and citizen inclusion in the decision-making process exacerbated feelings of distrust and alienation in spite of the Nigerian Labour Congress led strikes.

Furthermore, the research underscores a critical communication gap in the government's approach: the near-total omission of any discourse around alternative energy solutions or a sustainable energy transition plan. This omission not only weakened the legitimacy of the removal subsidy but also tampered with the opportunity to re-frame the policy within a long-term environmental and developmental agenda.

Recommendations

The study recommends that political officeholders demonstrate strong political will to drive Nigeria's development by ensuring transparency and accountability in the management of public funds. It also calls for a thorough review of the impact of monetary and trade policies on economic growth. Okoh et al. (2021), explained how Nigerian economic growth has been affected by monetary and economic policies for the years 2017 to 2023.

The study recommended the following policies:

1. Diversify Nigeria's trade beyond oil and primary exports, and implement transparent communication with strategic measures (e.g., security, transport, refinery privatisation) to stabilise fuel supply and pricing post-subsidy.
2. That government should promote affordable alternative energy sources such as compressed natural gas to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, and immediately establish a comprehensive, safe public transportation system across the nation.
3. Rail transportation infrastructure nationwide is long overdue as it is truly designed as a mass transportation system. That would reduce the pressure on the finances of the average citizens.
4. There is need for government to engage its disparate audiences strategically using the digital platforms that make targeted global communication seamless.

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