

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

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Abstract

This study examines the multifaceted implications of fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the resulting communication crisis between the government and citizens, public reactions, and the evolving discourse on alternative energy, especially natural gas. Drawing on qualitative interviews with policymakers, labour union representatives, media professionals, civil society actors, and energy experts, alongside media content and discourse analysis, the study reveals that ineffective, reactive, and poorly framed government communication strategies significantly exacerbated public mistrust, protests, and economic disruptions. The findings further demonstrate that although alternative energy narratives, particularly Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), have gained prominence following subsidy removal, infrastructural deficits, policy inconsistencies, and limited public engagement constrain and delay their adoption. Anchored in Framing Theory, the study contributes to scholarship on political communication, energy policy, and governance by illustrating how communication failures undermine policy legitimacy in resource-dependent economies. The article concludes that successful subsidy reform requires transparent, participatory communication and credible linkage between fiscal savings and visible social benefits.

Keywords: fuel subsidy removal; government communication; framing; alternative energy; Nigeria; labour protests

Introduction

Nigeria, one of the largest oil producers in Africa, the country's economy is heavily dependent on oil revenues, which make subsidy policies an integral part of government financial sources. Nigeria as the sixth largest oil exporter, has a total of 173 oil blocks in operation (Vanguard, 2013:5). According to OPEC's Annual Statistical Bulletin 2012, record shows that Nigeria has proven crude oil reserves of 37.5 billion barrels, while proven natural gas reserves stand at 5.154 million cubic meters, and by 1970, it had become the leading source of foreign exchange, accounting for 63.9 per cent and making it the eighth in the world gas reserves and first in Africa.

In Nigeria, oil was discovered in Ogoni land in 1956 and there are approximately fifty-six oil wells in Ogoni land which is the fifth largest oil producing community in River State. The first oil well was discovered in commercial quantities in Oloibiri in present-day Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta region in 1956, where exploration activities by Shell-BP (Shell Darcy) oil company commenced. Crude oil production and export started in Nigeria in 1958 which accounted for 7.1 per cent of

total exports in 1961 and was dominated at that time by cocoa; groundnut; rubber and palm oil in that order. In 1965, Nigeria's first oil refinery was established at Alesa Eleme also in Ogoni land (Osaghae, 1995).

In 1998, the Ijaw, a Delta-based clan located in Bayelsa State and the fourth-largest ethnic group in Nigeria, began to organize protests under similar grievances expressed by the Ogoni. Following negotiations with the government for a larger share of oil revenue, community development and political representation that failed, militant groups formed and launched a series of multi-dimensional offensive on government officials, infrastructure and the energy sector. Notably, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), led by Alhaji Mujahid Asari Dokubo, and Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), led by Ateke Tom, were the first significant Ijaw militant groups to emerge; additionally, many other smaller, autonomous militias were later formed to pursue the same goal.

Currently, the proven oil reserve is estimated at 36 billion barrels. Historically, this reserve, which is one of the biggest in the world, is estimated to last for about 46 years. Globally, Nigeria's low Sulphur Oil (Bonny light) is very much in high demand in North America and European markets (Nriagu, 2016) annually. Overall, over the past decade production and export levels have averaged between 1.2 and 2.7 billion barrels per day after picking up in 2009 from an all-time low of 200–700 million barrels per day following the commencement of the amnesty programme for militants in the oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta effectively.

According to Ozili (2023), Nigeria is rated as Africa's second largest producer of crude oil after Libya, eighth largest exporter in the whole world and the tenth largest oil reserves. Despite this situation, Nigerians are concerned about the lack of positive impact from the substantial revenues generated since the inception of oil production and exportation in the country. Widespread protests of various degrees from different quarters have emerged against inadequate supplies, poor distribution and steady increases in the pump prices of major refined products namely Premium Motor Spirit (PMS, Petrol), Automotive Gas Oil (AGO, Diesel), Household Kerosene (HHK), Dual Purpose Kerosene (DPK) and Aviation Turbine Kerosene (ATK). Between 1960 and 1975 petroleum products were not subsidised in Nigeria. Subsidising products, particularly petrol, began in 1975 and were finally deregulated with the subsidy removal for the PMS and Kerosene in May 2023.

The federal government implemented fuel subsidy policy, to reduce product prices and alleviate the direct burden on citizens significantly. Specifically, the introduction of this policy resulted in substantial expenditures for the federal government annually. This is evident in the approximately 2.5 trillion naira spent on fuel subsidies between 2006 and 2009, and the 600 billion naira budgeted for fiscal year 2010 respectively (Movement for Economic Emancipation, 2010). During the 2011 fiscal year, the Presidency and National Assembly authorized 240 billion naira as oil subsidy in the Appropriation Act (Osula & Adebisi, 2001). However, by October 2011, the subsidy scheme expended approximately 1.5 trillion naira, revealing extra-budgetary spending of 1.2 trillion naira. This was on Petrol and kerosene since Diesel had been deregulated earlier in 2004.

The announcement in January 2012 for the removal of fuel subsidy by the government of President Goodluck Jonathan was a reaction to the perilous consequences of continued subsidy as it was now competing with the national budget. The announcement was followed by series of protests by labour unions, opposition party, notable Nigerians and the general public who described the resultant pump price hike as an undesirable gift, the country faces unemployment, lack of confidence in government and security challenges amongst others, as the common expectation was that the government would never consider price increment at a time of economic depression. The media, including newspapers were very active in setting the tone agenda for public action against the increases. (Osula & Adebisi, 2001).

Historically, labour strike actions in Nigeria tended to focus on members wage issues rather than governance, infrastructure, education and the wellbeing of the populace. In 1963, labour's resisted pay raises for ministers and members of parliament. On December 31, 1990, labour's threats to embark on strike pressured General Ibrahim Babangida's military government into doubling the minimum wage from N125 (\$0.77) to N250 (\$1.54) per month (Owoye, 1994). In 1993, labour went on strike after employers refused to agree to a 45% wage increase for junior public servants. In 2000, labour again used strike tactics to achieve N7,500 (\$46.31) a month minimum wage. And in 2002, the threat of labour strikes saw the government agree to a 25% wage increase.

The current minimum wage of N18,000 per month (\$111), which is only about 35% of the original figure demanded, was only endorsed after labour threatened to go on strike a month before the 2011 elections (Medoye, 2020). Government attempts at removing fuel subsidy and the consequent increases in the pump prices may have availed labour the opportunity to negotiate better conditions of service for their members.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To examine the historical impact of fuel subsidy implementation on Nigeria's economy and the welfare of citizens over time.
2. To analyse public, media, and institutional responses to fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria, with particular attention to protests, strikes, and social reactions.
3. To investigate the communication strategies adopted by the Nigerian government during different phases of fuel subsidy removal and assess their effectiveness in managing public perception and response.
4. To examine media framing of fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria and how such frames shaped public understanding, trust, and resistance.
5. To analyse the evolving discourse on alternative energy sources, particularly natural gas (CNG and LPG), as a sustainable policy response to fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria.

Based on the above objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How has the long-standing implementation of the fuel subsidy regime affected Nigeria's economy and the socio-economic conditions of its citizens over time?
2. What patterns of public reaction, including strikes and protests, have accompanied attempts at fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria, and what factors account for these responses?
3. What communication strategies did the Nigerian government adopt during various attempts at fuel subsidy removal, and how effective were these strategies in managing public response and trust?
4. How did Nigerian media frame fuel subsidy removal across different periods, and what implications did these frames have for public perception and legitimacy of the policy?
5. How has the discourse on alternative energy sources, particularly natural gas, evolved in response to fuel subsidy removal, and to what extent is it communicated as a viable and sustainable energy transition pathway?

Literature Review

Oil Subsidies in Nigeria

The Nigerian economy has been subsidised from multifaceted support measures for many years, and this includes fuel, agricultural, electricity, education, health, exchange rate and many others. Fuel subsidies were introduced in the 1975 and became institutionalised in President Obasanjo's regime in 1977, following the enactment of the Price Control Act which made it illegal for some products (including fuel) to be sold above the regulated price (PwC Nigeria 2022). The military government of General Olusegun Obasanjo reviewed the pump price of fuel, 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. Despite the fact that Nigeria sells petroleum products higher than any other oil producing countries. 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 Premium Motor Spirit (PMS, Petrol) in Nigeria is higher than any of the other twelve major oil producing nations surveyed.

Table 1: Prices of fuel per litre and daily crude oil production in some oil producing and developing nations as of 2012

S/N	Nation	Daily Crude Oil Production	Pump Prices fuel in US Dollar	Pump Prices in Nigeria Naira
1	Nigeria	2.5 million barrels	0.61	97
2	Brunei	1.2 billion cubic	0.39	62
3	Algeria	1.2 billion barrels	0.41	65
4	Bahrain	48, 000 barrels	0.27	43.2
5	Egypt	536K	0.31	49.6
6	Iraq	3.2 million barrels	0.38	60.8
7	Kuwait	3.67 million barrels	0.22	35.2
8	Qatar	2.3 million barrels	0.22	35.2
9	Saudi Arabia	3 million barrels	0.16	25.6
10	UAE	2.9 million barrels	0.49	78
11	Venezuela	3.1 million barrels	0.023	3.68
12	Libya	1.4 million barrels	0.17	27.2

Source: Germans Technical Cooperation (GTZ) published, 2012

It could be stated that corruption appears to be rampant in most oil producing nations. The country scores 25% by occupying 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).

There have been several attempts by previous governments to remove the fuel subsidy, for example, President Olusegun Obasanjo attempted to remove fuel subsidy five times during his 8 years tenure but was marred by protests. Similarly, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua/Goodluck Jonathan regimes announced reversal of the last price change by Obasanjo on assumption of duty but by January 2012, President Jonathan was compelled to announce the removal of fuel subsidy stating that government would be saving about N1.3 trillion per annum, which the it plans to use for shoring up other sectors of the economy, which include education, health, agriculture and infrastructural provisions particularly for effective downstream operations (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2014).

Ironically, fuel subsidies are in reality supported by ordinary citizens, who perceived them as one of the few consistent benefits delivered by the Nigerian government (even then, fuel was not consistently available at the fixed price across the country), while influential political constituencies, such as trade unions, have been vociferous and adamant in their opposition to past efforts at subsidy reform. For example, Nigerian trade unions have played a pivotal role in mobilizing protests against fuel subsidy removals since the mid-1980s, most recently in the extensive 2012 protests known as 'Occupy Nigeria' (Ikenga, A. Francis & Oluka, N. Lucas, 2023). These protests were based on the idea promoted by the trade unions that the fuel subsidy forms part of a social contract in Nigeria (Houeland, 2022). The government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) at the time argued that removing the subsidy was necessary to combat corruption, but protesters in Lagos carried signposts and T-shirts saying 'Kill corruption, not

Nigerians', indicating the popular sentiment that taking away a public good instead of going after corrupt elites was unjust (Houeland, 2020).

In 2021, President Mohammadu Buhari, ten years after #Occupy Nigeria, made plans to remove fuel subsidy from the 2022 budget, but it became an issue that equally elicited different reactions from the citizens and Labour groups. According to Flamini, V., & Sears, L. (2015), oil subsidy has both pros and cons in the economy. Other studies revealed that fuel subsidy in Nigeria could cause inflation and reduce economic welfare (Adenikinju, 2009). Fuel subsidies in some countries like Nigeria, are conceptualised as an integral component of an implicit social contract (Fattouh et al., 2016; Moerenhout et al., 2017). To Moerenhout (2018), abolishing or reducing fuel subsidies without enhancing social welfare protection may be perceived as a unilateral change in social welfare contract, and can lead to social unrest, public disorder, protests, and political instability. However, fuel subsidy removal is contentious because there is the argument that fossil fuel subsidy is a form of aid because it makes fuel more affordable for the poor.

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 offering palliatives and grants.

Overall, the strike actions in Nigeria while it lasted have caused severe economic disruptions, including financial losses, limited investment in the sector, arbitrage, reduced revenue, increased hardship, and slowed development. These disturbances highlight the deep-seated challenges of balancing economic reforms with social stability in Nigeria's complex socio-economic landscape.

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 impact 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 fuel subsidies. Fuel subsidy removal is a complex and contentious issue that impact various stakeholders, including consumers, policymakers, and energy providers.

Challenges of Fuel Subsidy Removal Policy in Nigeria

The Nigerian state appears to have grappled for more than half a century to evolve policy options for sustainable national development. Essentially, public policies are seen as a strategic framework of action that guide government decisions in modern nations, both developed and developing societies design policies for the attainment of several state objectives that are geared towards empowering citizens to overcome daily needs, as well as overall development of the entire society. A policy may be referred to as the process of making relevant institutional and organisational decisions which include the identification of different alternatives such as programmes or priorities

on expenditures, and making choices among them based on the anticipated outcomes they will have (Alumona & Odigbo, 2016).

Consequently, despite the pivotal role of the state policies in the development process, Nigeria appears to have garnered limited or suboptimal benefits from the multifarious policies and programmes implemented by the government over the years. For instance, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) was introduced in 1972 to ensure increased food production in Nigeria through active involvement and participation of all the citizens to encourage individuals for self-reliance and sustenance. According to Iwuchukwu & Igbokwe (2012), undue preference was accorded to government establishments and individuals in authority/administration over the poor farmers (real producer of food) in terms of provision of inputs was cited as a reason for the programme's ineffectiveness.

From the above analysis, it is important to note that most policies in Nigeria failed due to external and foreign influence, top-down method of communication, unclear implementation strategy, poor articulation or total exclusion of the targeted audiences. Programmes such as the Green Revolution of 1979, the Nigerian Agricultural Insurance Corporation of 1987, Roll Back Malaria 2001, National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) 2004, Millennium Development Goals (2005) and many other are all policies of immense relevance but failed to provide corresponding remedial response to the challenges that necessitated their adoption and implementation. Accordingly, (Obamwonyi & Aibieyi, 2014) posit that in most cases, these policies and programmes were either never executed midstream or are jettisoned due to 'inbuilt failure' or by sheer deliberate subversion.

Table 2: Various Petrol Price Adjustments in Nigeria Since 1978 -2023

Date	President and Nature of Government	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 Shehu 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 privatization, removal of price control, elimination of barrier to participation in all aspects of supply, production, and distribution of goods and services by private investors. Bankole (2001), postulates that a regulated market can lead to an increase in shortages, hoarding and the existence of black market in the economy. Deregulation is often used interchangeably with liberalization, yet they are not the same. Liberalization is the broad economic policy of reducing government control and opening markets to competition, while deregulation is a specific tool that removes, reduces, or simplifies regulations within industries. Liberalization acts as the overall strategy, and deregulation acts as the process to implement it. However, the British Council define liberalisation as a programme and sector that fosters policy and institutional change designed to emancipate internal and external markets for goods and services which improves efficient operations of markets, restructuring enterprise, distortion, correcting markets, and institutions in public sector, and strengthening 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 connotes either the partial or total withdrawal of government controls in the allocation and production of goods and services. The question that should be asked at this juncture is if there are gains of deregulation in Nigeria or

purported benefits of deregulation in Nigeria? This question cannot be adequately answered in isolation of the theoretical foundation of deregulation. The most contentious issue in Nigeria is arguably the question of deregulation of the oil sector which has been generating intense polemics from its proponents and detractors.

The protagonists (proponents) posit that the deregulation of the downstream sector of the petroleum industry would ultimately actualize the objective of mitigating perennial fuel scarcity and maintaining sustainable fuel supply across the polity. It also avers that deregulation of the sector would serve as a catalyst for foreign investments and reduce the incidence of petroleum products smuggling and inefficiencies in the sector. Besides, the study argues that petroleum products in Nigeria used to be among the lowest priced in the world and with deregulation; the government would be able to channel funds to other sectors of the economy, thereby fostering economic diversification. Moreover, the protagonists contend that deregulation would break the monopoly of fuel supply by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) which has been unable to take advantage of its sovereign status of overseeing the entire national oil and gas portfolio including four non-performing refineries. As the refineries were not working, the liberalization and deregulation would enable other stakeholders, including major and independent marketers, to import and market products, thereby promoting competition and market contestability (Onyishi et al., 2012).

Given that, NNPC lacks the capacity to import sufficient petroleum products to satiate the country, couple with the perennial malfunctioning of the refineries, the government's implementation of the Petroleum Support Fund (PEF), from which it draws money to pay the excess expenditure incurred by the marketers for importing and selling petrol at regulated price and distributing it to every part of the country, should be stopped, according to review. The major proponents of these ideas include the Federal Government, the Presidential Steering Committee on the Global Financial Crisis, the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG). The antagonists (detractors) on the other hand, believe that the Nigeria petroleum industry should not be subject to comprehensive liberalization, deregulation, or privatization, for whatever reason and that the status quo should remain, maybe with minor fine tuning "here and there" to improve efficiency, as appropriate, "in the overall national interest" (Onyishi et al., 2012).

The review of this study posits that Nigeria's state-owned refineries and petrochemical plants in Kaduna, Warri, and Port Harcourt I and II operate far below optimal capacity. It further highlights the severe neglect, persistent deterioration, and recurrent vandalization of state-run petroleum product pipelines and oil transportation infrastructure across the country. The study identifies the entrenched consequences of institutionalized corruption as a central concern.

In addition, it notes the emergence of a *nouveau riche* class of oil oligarchs and organized oil syndicates. These actors are alleged to orchestrate and coordinate crude oil and refined petroleum product theft, including large-scale pipeline sabotage and illegal bunkering nationwide. The review also draws attention to the pervasive involvement of corrupt task force operatives who facilitate cross-border smuggling of petroleum products, as well as the diversion of both crude oil and refined products.

Collectively, these factors are identified as the root causes of the prolonged and seemingly intractable fuel crises that have afflicted Nigeria for nearly a decade. The study concludes that these outcomes are largely predictable consequences of sustained government intervention in the downstream sector of the Nigerian petroleum industry. Such intervention, it argues, has precipitated a significant paradigmatic shift in the sector's operational and governance 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 Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and organized civil society. To Onyishi (2012), between the proponents and detractors, the deregulation of the petroleum industry in Nigeria should be implemented in phases, thereby enabling the state-owned monopolies to regain operational efficiency and competitiveness before full privatization. The response of government has been to say that there is no alternative to the removal of subsidy, however, with due deference, numerous alternative modalities exist. There are indeed so many other painless ways of doing the same thing. Other countries have successfully implemented deregulation policies without imposing undue hardship on their citizens. It is not true that the government cannot deal with the corruption posed by the oil marketers that feed on the subsidy money. Shortly after the 2012 #Occupy Nigeria episode, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFFCC) probed the subsidy scheme which led to the publication of *The Shadows of Loot & Losses – Uncovering Nigeria's Petroleum Subsidy Fraud* (Bawa, A, 2025).

Deregulation fundamentally entails true entry and exit from marketing of petroleum products by individuals who possess the requisite capacity, with minimal or less government restrictions of manipulation. It also ensures that private initiative and capital are unleashed to attain competitive efficiency and pricing system determined by the dynamics of international market. However, this view is not in conformity with the federal government integrated subsidy initiative, which seeks to relief Nigerian consumers from the vagaries of the international market shocks in ensuring price stability and predictability.

The Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA) now Nigeria Midstream Downstream Petroleum Authority (NMDPRA), that was put in place by government despite its spirited effort of ensuring strict and regular monitoring of the market trends to provide Nigerians with up-to-date data from the international oil market, the operatives found ways to profiteer. Approaching the last quarter of 2011, the then Minister of Finance, Mallam Adamu Ciroma during the 2002 budget preparations had assured Nigerians that the Federal Government had decided to exempt petroleum products sold at filling stations from taxation at prevailing prices. Moreover, this assurance was fully contradicted by PPPRA's actions, when the agency increased petrol price from N22 to N26 per litre, an increase of 18.2 per cent at a time the 2002 budget had not been approved. The Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Agency had insisted that the marginal increase signaled the commencement of deregulation of the downstream oil sector and hinted that fuel prices would be reviewed at every quarter of the year. PPPRA further concluded that market liberalization and deregulation is an economic policy that seeks to emancipate the downstream sector from governmental restriction and control, thereby promoting market-driven dynamics (Okpaga et al., 2012).

This price increase triggered strike action, which was only contained by a court injunction and release of the gazette on why fuel prices are not labour issues but purely economic and within government competencies. The government's underlying assumption was perhaps that this policy would break the monopoly of NNPC on the oil sector, through the fundamental idea behind the increase was to shore up its oil revenue by allowing multiple supplies into the market through the Major Marketers Association of Nigeria (MOMAN) and the Independent Marketers Association of Nigeria (IPMAN). It is thus obvious that the governments are unmindful of the timing and impact. Barely a year later, the government increased petrol prices from N26 to N40 per litre. The ensuing labour strike resulting in a concessionary reduction to N34 per litre. The pattern of strikes following every price increase and negotiations between government and labour groups went on for many years as shown in the table below.

Table 3: History of Fuel Subsidy Strike Actions in Nigeria between 2000 and 2016

Date	Cause of Strike	Duration	Resolution
June 1, 2000	Price of petrol increased from N11/litre to N30/litre	Eight days	Price reduced to N20/litre
June 16, 2002	Price increased from N20/litre to N26/litre	Two days	Price retained at N26/litre
June 30 – July 8, 2003	Price increased from N26/litre to N40/litre	Eight days	Price reduced to N34/litre
June 9, 2004	Price increased from N34/litre to N50/litre	Three days	New price of N42/litre agreed between Govt. and NLC
October 11, 2004	Price increased from N42/litre to N52/litre	Three days	Govt. appointed a 19-member committee on palliatives
September 2005	Price increased from N52/litre to N65/litre	No strike	Protests led to a price cut
June 20, 2007	Price increased from N65/litre to N70/litre	Four days	Price reduced to N65/litre
January 1, 2012	Price increased from N65/litre to N141/litre	Eight days	Price reduced to N97/litre
May 18, 2016	67% spike in prices	Four days	Government expressed readiness to return to the negotiation table.

Compiled by the author

Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by the Framing theory, originally developed by Goffman in 1974. According to framing a communication text or message is to accentuate certain facets of a perceived reality and make them more prominent in such a way that endorses a moral evaluation, causal interpretation, specific problem definition, and or a treatment recommendation (Asemah et al., 2022). This implies that the way information is presented influences audience reception, interpretation and perception. According to Littlejohn and Foss (2008), framing theory is seen as a second level agenda setting, as it purports not only to inform the audience what to think about (agenda setting) but also prescribes how to think about an issue (second level agenda setting, framing theory).

According to Littlejohn and Foss (2008), there are two methodological approaches in which framing can be applied in communication research: individual and media frames. Individual framing is the cognitive interpretation of a given situation while media framing is the use of words, images, phrases, and style to communicate issues. This can also be used in analysing the role of media in reporting and managing conflict (Apeloko & Olajide, 2017). To (McQuail, 2005), the theory explains the ability of the media to persuade the audience to accept a particular meaning of a situation more than the other.

Folarin (2002) asserts that framing is more than just up certain issues, it provides a comprehensive outline of the way in which the issues are presented and interpretation given to it by the public. Asemah et al., (2022) revealed that framing enables media to construct and shape economic, political, social issues and other realities for media audience. Framing theory allows media researchers to investigate the representation of media in shaping public perception and influence policy debates. It also allows media researchers to explore imagery, themes, language and tones employed by the selected newspapers, and its influence on public interpretation, reception and perception. In the context of this research, the framing theory is relevant in analyzing media coverage of significant events, such as the fuel subsidy removal policy in Nigeria through the selected presentation of information. With use of framing 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 fuel subsidy removal policy in Nigeria.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate oil subsidy removal and communication crisis in Nigeria and exploring government strategies and alternative energy discourse. Since the main 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 reaction 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 provides 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 use purposive sampling to select relevant official documents (e.g., official statements, press releases), interview respondents and media outlets (*Daily Trust, The Guardian, The Punch*). This approach ensures the inclusion of stakeholders, policymakers, energy sector experts, labour union representatives, and citizenry. The study used 15 participants as a suitable number for qualitative research guidelines. According to (Guest et al., 2006), this method will help 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 on fuel subsidy and 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 Organization (CSO) leaders/advocates (3 participants), labour union representatives (3 participants) the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). This broad representation allowed for a multi-dimensional understanding of the communication crisis and the evolving discourse.

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, emphasising gas as a sustainable solution in response to oil subsidy removal. The identified themes demonstrate the current state of alternative energy discussion in Nigeria's media environment and the various elements that influence public discourse.

Emerging Alternative Energy Narratives

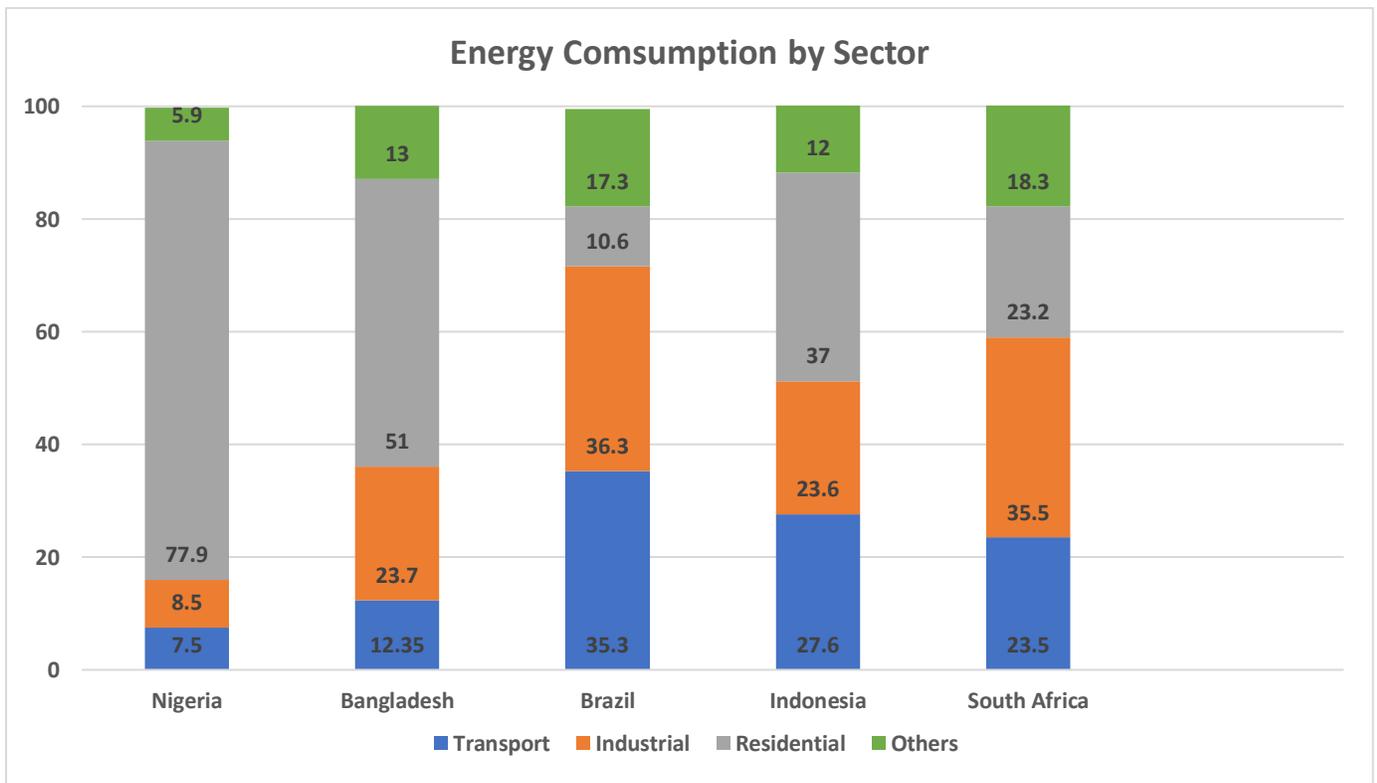
The discourse around alternative energy sources, particularly natural gas, in Nigeria has increasingly recognised its potential as a sustainable solution amid the post-removal of oil subsidies. The promotion of gas as a viable alternative to petroleum products emerged as the most prominent narrative within government communications, with seven out of ten academic writers interviewed emphasizing this transition. 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 implications of this decision are multifaceted, one sector that could experience significant effects is the LPG (Liquefied Petroleum Gas) industry. The removal of fuel subsidies is expected to have both positive and negative consequences for the LPG industry in Nigeria; as fuel prices rise due to the removal of subsidies, consumers are likely to explore alternative energy sources, and LPG presents a viable option. With its lower cost compared to gasoline or diesel, LPG could become more attractive to households, businesses, and industries. This increased demand would provide an opportunity for LPG producers, distributors, and retailers to expand their operations and market share. Investments in LPG terminals, storage facilities, bottling plants, and distribution networks would be crucial to meet the rising demand.”

“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 prioritize 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).

Table 4: Energy use by Sector



Source: GIZ (2015)

In the findings from the cost-benefit analysis and cost effectiveness analysis show an orientation towards renewable technologies, as evidence point towards a higher net benefit of 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 facts 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 alternative energy sources. This has important implications for energy policy making and efforts to enhance energy access in Nigeria.” (CSO Representative, Interview).

“The current energy portfolio of the country is only able to meet the energy needs of about half of the country’s population, while the other half lack access to a reliable and constant energy supply. The energy portfolio analysis has implications for increasing energy access and cost. It has shown that it is important at this stage to note the most competitive and viable options amongst the available energy sources.”

“Unlike the current strategy, where the expansion of energy access has mainly focused on grid-connected fossil fuel energy sources, the analysis has shown that renewable energy sources can provide a viable option or complement for improving energy access in Nigeria. Based on this study, the government should build up an energy portfolio in the prioritise order of hydro, wind, solar and gas.” (Development Finance, Stellenbosch University).

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

“CNG accounts for about 97% of final energy demand in the ETX scenario and this can be attributed to lower cost and carbon content of natural gas in the country when compared to other petroleum products like diesel and gasoline. The government can subsidise the prices of cleaner transport fuels (CNG and biofuels) as well as reduce the import duty on efficient vehicles—these incentives would encourage Nigerians to adopt cleaner transport systems.” (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 skepticism with immediate economic pains experienced by the 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. Infrastructure limitations were identified as the primary barrier to alternative energy adoption, especially for gas utilisation. As explained below:

“However, although Nigeria is one of the global top 10 natural gas producers, over the years gas production has been constrained by lack of infrastructure to monetise natural gas that is currently being flared, pipeline sabotage, vehicle performance and maintenance challenges, and supply disruptions which are common in Nigeria’s natural gas industry. Also, there is the need of more CNG conversion centres, 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 (2012) and President Tinubu (2023) has consistently triggered major public outcry and communication crises. This section examines the communication strategies being 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 was 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. Additionally, in May 2023, President Tinubu’s 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 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 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 removed fuel subsidies in 2013, causing petrol, kerosene, diesel, and LPG prices to increase by 15 per cent to 50 per cent until reaching market levels by mid-September. They invested the savings in critical sectors. While removing the fuel subsidy has some potential advantages, it also has its disadvantages. The government must

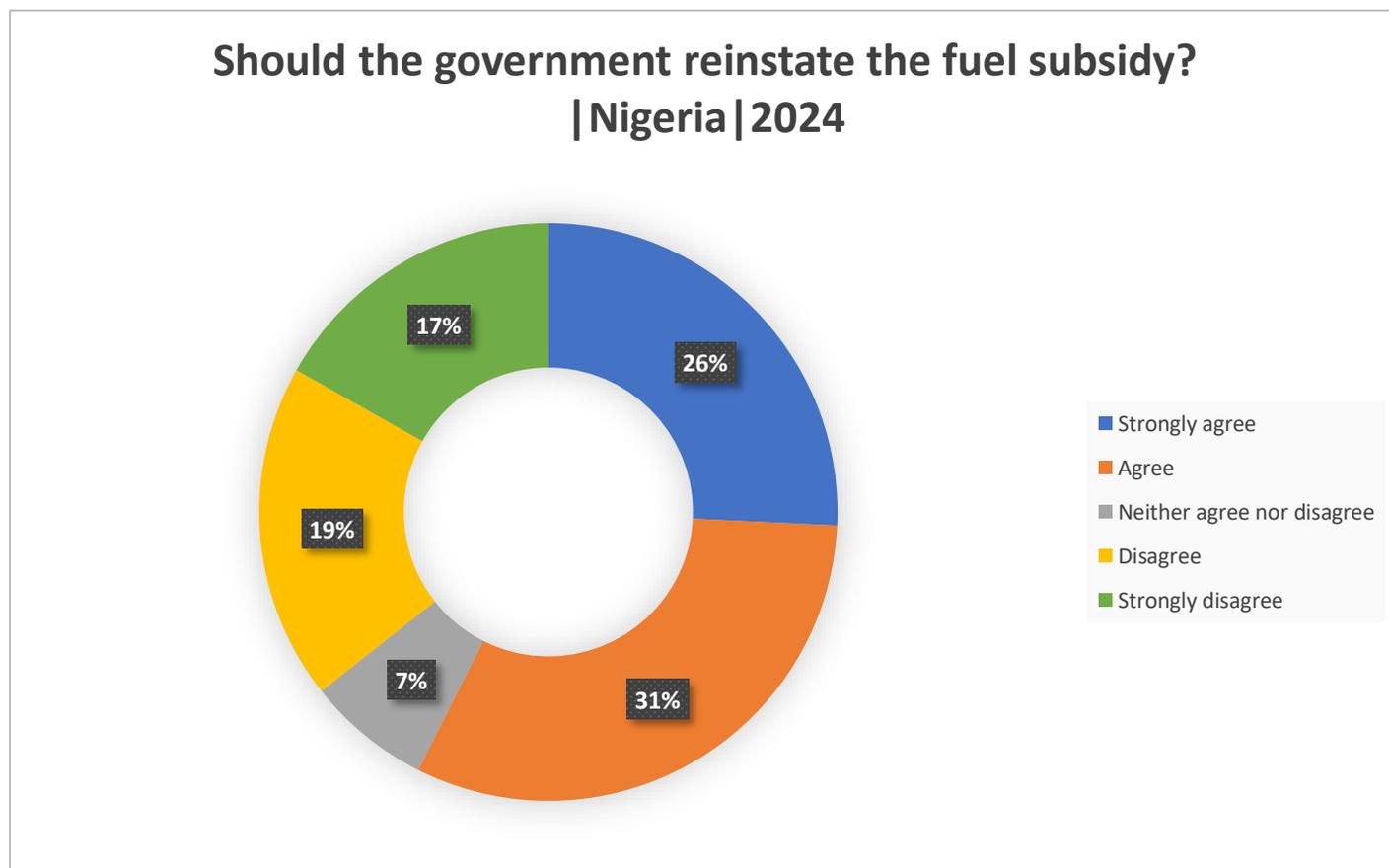
carefully consider the impact of removing the subsidy and take steps to mitigate any negative effects.” (Political analyst, interview).

“The key to gaining the public’s trust is for the government to be transparent and accountable for the money saved by removing subsidies. The government must assure Nigerians that the end of subsidies is not merely a matter of policy. 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 pandemonium and protests had begun, rather than a proactive measure. In 2012, under President Jonathan’s administration, the government only engaged with the Civil Society Groups and Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) after the “Occupy Nigeria” protests had gathered momentum. Additionally, in 2023, the promise of palliatives and dialogue with the labour unions in response to the immediate threat of widespread strikes and economic fallout only materialized partially. These attempts, which are necessary to de-escalate tensions have often appeared reactive. 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 approach would have promoted transparency and credibility in the conduct of government policies. Many vulnerable Nigerians were already under severe economic pressure. Apart from high unemployment and poverty rates, inflation was biting very hard.” (NLC Representative, interview).

“As an economist who has studied the Nigerian economy for over four decades, I can see why the fuel subsidy had to go. As I argued in a previous article, fuel subsidies were bad for the Nigerian economy. They worsened budget deficits and the country’s debt profile, encouraged corruption, and diverted resources away from critical sectors of the economy. They were also inequitable, transferring national wealth to elites. But, as has become clear from the unprecedented inflation in the country partly caused by the removal of fuel subsidies, the abrupt removal of the subsidy was not the best strategy to use. I believe this action should have been staggered over several months. 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 5: Should the government reinstate the fuel subsidy?



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?

Palliative Measures

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

Moreover, the communication that was centred around the palliatives always lacked concrete details and clear timelines. A random 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). The perceived delay and lack of transparency in the implementation of these measures undermined their credibility.

Comments from various stakeholders 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, because of market forces or 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 decentralize 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 relationship 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 evidences of consequential action. 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 discussions surrounding the alternative energy issue. The qualitative analysis of media portrayals, interviews, and public sentiments have yielded significant insights, which had thrown light on the complex interplay of communication, policy, and public perception in a critical economic reform. The findings in the same light, reveal that the policy shift, enacted during the administration of President Jonathan in 2012, President Buhari in 2022 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 abrupt ending of subsidy elicited significant public dissent was largely fueled by ineffective communication strategies and perceived insensitivity in timing and content of the announcement – *fuel subsidy is gone*. 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 (LPG and CNG), 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 catalyzed 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 price increase, which causes economic burden has evidently forced ordinary the 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 rhetorics and public sphere, as the reality of its adoption is challenged by systemic issues as poverty, corruption and poor governance. This divergence emphasizes a potential area for future communication strategies in terms of purposeful communication that clearly communicate plans for infrastructural development, good governance, poverty alleviation, accessible health facilities and product availability.

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 disruptive, widespread protest and public mistrust, as detailed in this study, 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 public regards government hardship mitigation and palliative measures as lacking credibility and ineffective. This critical aspect of crisis communication, that was aimed at 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 mobilization are often met with suspicion and antagonism.

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 mobilization of strikes and protests, as they have historically done (Houeland, 2022).

Conclusion

The study concludes that fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria represents not only an economic reform challenge but also a communication failure. It critically examined the intersection of fuel subsidy removal, government communication strategies, and public discourse in Nigeria, with particular attention to the extent to which alternative energy narratives were incorporated into policy communication. The findings demonstrate that while subsidy removal is a globally recognised policy response to fiscal pressures, its implementation in Nigeria is deeply entangled with the country's rentier political economy, weak institutional capacity, and longstanding governance deficits. Persistent leadership failures and entrenched corruption have eroded public trust, resulting in widespread skepticism towards government policies, including fuel subsidy reforms.

Although fuel subsidy removal may offer potential economic benefits, the study reveals that these benefits are undermined by inadequate preparation, weak palliative mechanisms, and insufficient consideration of the policy's socio-economic consequences. Effective mitigation measures remain essential to cushioning vulnerable populations and ensuring that subsidy reform does not exacerbate inequality or social exclusion. More broadly, sustainable reform requires balancing economic efficiency with social equity and affordable access to energy.

The study further underscores the fact that successful subsidy reform depends significantly on rebuilding public trust, particularly through transparent management and redistribution of fiscal savings. As demonstrated in other contexts, inclusive political responses and participatory governance structures are critical to securing public buy-in and ensuring equitable outcomes. In Nigeria, the sequencing of subsidy reform and energy transition policies is especially important, given the centrality of fossil fuels to the national economy and power infrastructures.

Crucially, the findings reveal that fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria was executed through a flawed, top-down communication strategy characterised by opacity, inconsistency, and reactive messaging. The absence of sustained public engagement and participatory dialogue intensified misinformation, resistance, and public resentment. The opportunistic stance of labour using the subsidy regime as a bargaining chip for welfare and sundry unrelated matters did not help the citizenry. Equally significant was the government’s failure to integrate alternative energy and energy transition narratives into its communication framework early enough. This omission weakened policy legitimacy and foreclosed the opportunity to reframe subsidy removal as part of a broader, long-term developmental and sustainability agenda. These findings provide the basis for the policy recommendations that follow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended that political office holders should exhibit the political will to transform Nigeria into a developed country through transparency and accountability in how public funds are used. The following policy recommendations are worth considering.

1. Institutionalise Pre-Policy Communication (RQ3): Government should adopt mandatory pre-announcement communication frameworks for major economic reforms, including stakeholder consultations, media briefings, and scenario simulations. Abrupt announcements amplify distrust and resistance.
2. Embed Framing Strategy into Economic Policy Design (RQ3): Economic reforms should be accompanied by coherent framing strategies that align fiscal necessity with lived realities. Frames of “anti-corruption” must be supported by visible accountability mechanisms to avoid credibility collapse.
3. Link Subsidy Savings to Tangible Social Goods (RQ1): Savings from subsidy removal should be ring-fenced and publicly tracked, with clear communication linking funds to transport, healthcare, and energy infrastructure to rebuild the broken social contract.
4. Integrate Alternative Energy into Public Communication (RQ2): Government communication must explicitly position CNG and LPG adoption within a phased national energy transition narrative, supported by timelines, incentives, and infrastructure commitments.
5. Strengthen Media and State Engagement Mechanisms (RQ1–RQ3): Rather than episodic crisis briefings, the state should establish continuous media engagement platforms to prevent misinformation, disinformation, reduce adversarial framing, and enhance public understanding during reforms.

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