

## EDITORIAL COMMENTS

### SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH IN NIGERIA: NEED FOR STATUS RE-EVALUATION AMIDST THE GLOBAL COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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#### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a unique West African nation endowed with abundant human and natural resources, and a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural population, governed under a democratic setting, but battling with leadership failures, gross corruption, ethno-religious intolerance and worsening state of insecurity due to banditry, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, violent secessionist agitations and outright acts of terrorism. These societal malaise have damaging consequences on several sectors of the Nigerian society, particularly the health sector; hence, the calls to re-evaluate the nation's key social determinants of health, particularly in this Covid-19 pandemic era.

Available literature indicate that social determinants of health stem from conditions that affect a wide range of human health and the population's overall quality of life, within a given environment in which populations live and participate in several socio-cultural and socio-economic activities. Such determinants of interest includes climatic conditions and environmental pollution – as seen in the northern and southern-southern parts of Nigeria respectively, as well as the issues of employment or unemployment defining family incomes. Others are poverty, insecurity, cultural and religious practices/beliefs, illiteracy, dearth of basic infrastructure, poor operational health systems, underfunding for health care and poor remuneration of health workers (as well as brain drain), policy inconsistencies, unregulated patronage of herbal practitioners, quackery, drug counterfeiting, life style trajectories -smoking, abuse of drugs and alcoholism, and inefficient legal redress system for gross misconduct by health workers.

Judging therefore, by the current overall state of Nigeria, one cannot but conclude that there exist several factors of interest, with capacity to influence citizens' overall health status. Some of these factors of interest

may have positive impacts, but many have overwhelming negative impacts that can become aggravated by myriad of forces, including economics, social policies and politics.

Obviously, the widely publicised classification of Nigeria as the 'poverty capital of the world, literarily conveys the reality about the negative impacts of poverty on population's health in Nigeria, amidst high unemployment rates, economic crisis, leadership failures, gross corruption across board, and insecurity that is currently breeding more hunger in the land. It is also well known that poverty can account for cases of malnutrition and poor health, which in turn, causes diseases among very poor and vulnerable populations. Amidst the alarming unemployment rates in Nigeria, is the irony that even those employed are hardly enjoying regular salary payments. These scenarios have now been compounded by the pervasive economic impact of Covid-19 pandemic, and in turn, triggering depression, mental health issues, cardiovascular accidents and 'untimely' deaths.

Another issue of concern is the increasing patronage of herbal practitioners, which, in most cases, is a direct response to the inability of majority of the population to access or afford modern healthcare services, since the operational order for health care funding and access in Nigeria, is the 'out-of-pocket payment mode' by patients, as against the efficient health insurance schemes running in developed countries for quality health care services. Even the existing but limited health insurance schemes, only cover few individuals, particularly those categorized as 'employed'. More so, the regulatory framework for the practice of herbal medicine in Nigeria has not fully been established; hence, the trending abuse of herbal concoctions, which oftentimes, are ingested without defined doses, and in turn, causing more harm than good.





Additional concerns hover around diet choices and the lifestyle trajectories of most Nigerians. Diet choice by Nigerians has been implicated in certain disease conditions, particularly diabetes and hypertension. Life style trajectories have also been noted as a major social determinant for health, especially those associated with drug addiction, excessive intake of alcohol and tobacco smoking. Recent developments have shown that many young adults are progressively becoming more addicted to various forms of drugs. Beyond their negative health implications, such indiscriminate use of drugs have been implicated in the rising cases of violent crimes in Nigeria, like rape, murder, armed robbery, banditry and terrorism. In addition, the intake of locally brewed brands of alcohol amongst the population, alongside tobacco smoking, have also been implicated in the rising cases of organ damage, including liver damage, renal failure and lung cancer .

Some cultural/religious beliefs are also dictating the health outcomes of Nigerians. For instance, some religious groups do not believe in blood transfusion, even if they are on their dying beds. They would rather prefer to die than receive blood transfusion, despite the emergency. One other instance is the resistance to caesarean section by some Nigerian women, with claims that at stake, is their pride to deliver their babies like the ‘Hebrew women’ in the bible days, even when they are advised against it and the consequences made known to them. Such resistance is accounting for several avoidable maternal deaths and the sustained high maternal mortality rates in the country. Additionally, female genital mutilation have remained a practice in some Nigerian populations, despite its attendant consequences, while others are still insisting that male and female circumcision must be done the traditional way, despite instances resulting in complications and deaths.

Finally, the inefficient legal redress system to make health care service providers more efficient, has remained an issue of concern. In instances of gross misconduct, seeking legal redress by patients or families concerned, is usually cumbersome and can be a futile attempt, due to the complex and ineffective operational framework for such. In some cases, the individuals seeking redress can’t even afford the high legal fees required to pursue such cases to its logical conclusion. The case may not even see the light of day due to judicial corruption.

From the foregoing therefore, it is quite obvious that leadership failures across board and the pandemic-like state-of-corruption in Nigeria, amidst policy inconsistencies and inappropriate policy implementation strategies, remains the fulcrum-ring for the negativities shaping key social determinants of health in Nigeria; hence, the need for a holistic national health status re-evaluation policy in line with the millennium development goals.

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