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The Informal Economy: A Catalyst for Promoting Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

The informal sector is regarded as the engine of growth of the Nigerian economy as it accounts for over forty percent of the annual growth of the Gross Domestic Product and employs over 90 percent of the nation's workforce. Operation in the sector cuts across various spheres of the economy and as a result, provides an opportunity for players to consider the role their operations could play in promoting sustainable development in the country. This, they can realize by keying into the principles of sustainability through moderating the impact of their operations on the environment, society and the economy. The narrative textual case study method was used in appraising secondary data sourced from relevant texts, journals, magazines, the internet etc, on the impact generated on sustainable development by the sector. The study found that the informal sector has actually contributed to sustainability through waste recycling, conversion, reduction, reuse and the promotion of employment generation. Nigeria, among other African countries has persistently suffer the effect of pollution and abuse of the environment in terms of flooding, deforestation, desertification, food shortages, among others. There is therefore the need for the Nigerian informal sector to take the lead in Africa in order to promote and guarantee environmental sustainability, biodiversity and sustainable development in general. Similarly, those that depend on fossil fuel for their daily operation should devise means to adopt the use of renewable energy. Also, the use of forest and water resources should be done with moderation, while on a general term efforts are geared towards modernizing their operation in order to promote sustainable development in the country.

Keywords: Informal Economy, Catalyst, Promoting, Sustainable Development, Nigeria.

Introduction

Often referred to as the engine of growth of the Nigerian economy, the informal economy accounts for over 60% of economic growth in Nigeria according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023). The international Monetary Fund (2018), in its yearly assessment of global economic performance indicated that the informal sector contributed 65% to the Nigerian Gross Domestic Product in 2017. The Nigerian informal sector, as obtainable elsewhere, largely include economic activities that are unregulated by the

government. The incomes of players in the sector are therefore unofficially documented as they operate outside of the legal framework and government regulation (Abu & Collins, 2024).

The National Bureau of Statistics (2023), indicates that 92% of the total employments in the Nigerian economy are generated in the informal sector, while a recent International Labour Organisation (2022) report shows that (60% of global workforce) two billion people work informally, most of them in emerging and developing countries, with the majority of the workforce lacking social protection,

rights at work and decent working conditions.

The informal economy is often characterized by personal or family ownership, small or undefined work places, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, low levels of skills and productivity, low or irregular incomes, long working hours and lack of access to information, markets, finance, training and technology. It is worthy of note that the informal players do not significantly contribute to the tax base of the economy mainly due to low productivity and restricted access to finance which resulted in sluggish economic growth in countries with large informal sector (Abu, Braimah & Sherifat, 2020). The World Bank (2021), corroborated this view while stating that the generation of huge number of jobs in emerging and developing economies by the informal sector would result to a slow recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic by such economies.

In Nigeria, there has been a dramatic rise in the informal economy over the past two decades, which has been blamed on elements related to the country's economic context, rising unemployment, decreasing levels of market regulation, weak policy frameworks and socio-demographic drivers such as population growth, urbanization and rising poverty. As a result, millions of Nigerians, particularly those residing in the economic and commercial centres of the country, work, in the informal sector and also employ the most vulnerable residents (Olubiye, 2023).

Activities in the Nigerian informal economy range from agricultural production to mining and quarrying, small-scale building and construction, machine-shop manufacturing, fabrication,

blacksmithing and gold smiting, agro processing, meat and fish processing, leather work, wood work, pottery and ceramics etc; and all these involve the use of technology which is mainly local or indigenous to the people (Abu, Braimah & Sherifat, 2020).

There is the need for operators in the sector to consider a sustained mode of operation in order to promote operational and environmental sustainability. This therefore provides an opportunity for operators in the sector to consider an operational approach that would promote sustainable development in the country through the moderation of the impact of their operations on the environment, society and the economy. Sustainable development is meant to ensure that resources are utilized taking into consideration equity, justice and fairness, and therefore the need for informal sector operators to demonstrate consciousness in their daily operations.

Nigeria, among other African countries has persistently suffer the effect of pollution and abuse of the environment in terms of flooding, deforestation, desertification, food shortages, among others. This necessitated the need for the Nigerian informal sector to take the lead in Africa in order to promote and guarantee environmental sustainability, biodiversity and sustainable development in general by imbibing the culture of waste recycling, waste reduction and waste conversion, the use of renewable energy and the moderation application of resources taken into consideration the interest of the future generation.

Literature Review

Concept of the Informal Sector

The term 'informal sector' was first applied to the economic development model propounded in 1955 by development economist, Sir Arthur Lewis, to describe the nature of employment or livelihood generated in the Global South. It was used to describe a type of employment that was viewed as falling outside of the modern industrial sector (Lewis, 1955). However in 2007, an alternative definition by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (2007), defined participants in the informal economy as those who do not have employment security, work security and social security; here emphasis was laid on job security. While both of these definitions imply a lack of choice or agency in involvement with the informal economy, participation may also be driven by a wish to avoid regulation or taxation.

The term informal sector was however first coined into international usage by the International Labor Organization (1972), in its Kenya Mission Report, which defined informality as a way of doing things characterized by: ease of entry; reliance on indigenous resources; family ownership; small scale operations; labor intensive and adaptive technology; skills acquired outside of the formal sector; unregulated and competitive markets. After then, so many authors, the ILO inclusive have evolved many definitions and concepts of the informal sector. The ILO/ICFTU (1999), categorized the workforce of the informal sector into three broad groups:

(a) Owner-employers of micro enterprises, which employ a few paid workers, with or without apprentices;

(b) Own-account workers, who own and operate one-person business, who work alone or with the help of unpaid workers, generally family members and apprentices; and

(c) Dependent workers, paid or unpaid, including wage workers in micro enterprises, unpaid family workers, apprentices, contract labor, homeworkers and paid domestic workers.

The ILO (2022), further defined the informal sector as all economic activities by workers and economic units that are in law or in practice not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements. Adrian and Flor (2020), opined that the informal sector as a concept emerged in the 1970s and refers to a multiple and meaningful reality for productive units and workers who are outside of regulated economic activities and protected labor relations. The evolving informal sector ever since has become very important not only because of its expansion in many countries but also because this expansion has brought about new manifestations that are increasingly recognized as ways to promote growth and reduce poverty. Informal economic activities abound within both developed and developing economies, and as the global economy advanced and restructured, permanent or full-time work has gradually been replaced by non-conventional contract work or by informal jobs, given that the neoliberal era has dramatically reduced workers benefits like pensions or healthcare (Adrian and Flor, 2020).

Abu and Collins (2024), also defined the informal sector as the part of any economy that is neither taxed nor monitored by any form of government.

The informal sector constitutes a significant portion of the economies of developing countries and is sometimes stigmatized as troublesome and unmanageable as most of those who are engaged in the sector do not declare their income and as a result, pay no taxes on them. It is on this basis that Sarah (2020), refers to the informal economy as economic activities that take place without official recognition and record. Beyond such a minimal definition, multiple interpretations and definitions abound with divergent policy implications. While providing a livelihood means for millions of people in the Global South, the informal economy can also be found in Global North countries according to Sarah (2020). Therefore, the informal sector covers a wide range of labor market activities that involves two distinctive groups of individuals. The first group comprises of individuals and family members operating in an economic environment where earning opportunities are scarce, while the second group comprise of entrepreneurs who desire to escape state regulations.

The informal sector over the years has played an important and significant role the global south. It provides jobs and reduces unemployment and underemployment, but in many cases the jobs are low-paid and the job security is poor. It bolsters entrepreneurial activity, but at the detriment of state regulations compliance, particularly regarding tax and labor regulations (Abu and Collins, 2024). It helps alleviate poverty, but in many cases informal sector jobs are low-paid and the job security is poor. There exist a gap in the size of the informal economy between developed and developing countries, from an estimated 4-6% in the developed countries to over 50% in developing countries (Olubiyi, 2023). Its

size and role in the economy increases during economic downturns and periods of economic adjustment and transition. It has therefore become imperative that the informal sector will continue to exist along with the formal sector due to imbalances that are inherent in an economy, the labour market inclusive as evidenced in the global south.

Concept of Sustainability and Sustainable Development

The terms sustainability and sustainable development are closely related and do overlap. For example, they are both intrinsically linked with the three dimensions of sustainability concept (Purvis, Mao and Robinson, 2019). One distinction that could be made is that sustainability is a general concept, whereas sustainable development is a policy (Dogu and Aras, 2019; Berg, 2020). Sustainable development was first institutionalized with the "Rio Process" initiated at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio. Then in the year 2000, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) fully embraced sustainable development. UNESCO (2015), formulated it as follows: Sustainability is often thought of as a long-term goal (i.e. a more sustainable world), while sustainable development refers to the many processes and pathways to achieve it.

Sustainable development is the organizing principle for meeting human development goals while simultaneously sustaining the ability of natural systems to continuously provide the natural resources and ecosystem services based upon which the economy and society depend (Brown, 2015). The desired result is a state of society where living conditions and resources are used to continue to meet human needs without undermining the

integrity and stability of the natural system. Sustainable development can be defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Commission, 1987). There however exist more definitions of sustainable development, but they all have to do with the carrying capacity of the earth and its natural systems and the challenges faced by humanity (Williams and Millington, 2004).

For many in the field, sustainable development is defined through the following interconnected domains or pillars: environment, economic and social, (Gibbs, 2018), which according to Capra (2015), is based on the sustainability principles. The sub-domains of sustainable development have been considered to be cultural, technological and political (James, 2015). Sustainable development may be the organizing principle of sustainability, yet others may view the two terms as paradoxical (Brown, 2015; and Gibbs, 2018).

Several relevant conclusions have been made on sustainable development. Among such conclusions include that sustainable development is global and implies a three way approach of the economic-social- ecological systems, which implies a profound change in the mentality of the social system. Therefore, the acceptance of sustainable development ideas is hinged on the recognition that it can be approached in three major ways: the economic objectives, social objectives (welfare and equity) and ecological objectives (biodiversity and resources) (Duran, Alin, Luminita and Vasile, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

There are many school of thoughts on the informal economy. These school of thoughts or theories comprise of the dualism theory, structuralism theory, legalization theory, modernization theory, and among others. However, this study laid emphasis on the dualism theory given that the study focuses on an economy that is significantly dependent on activities of the informal sector.

The Dualist school of thought which was widespread in the 1970s through ILO (1972) and Hart (1973), deemed the informal sector to be an autonomous segment of the economy, existing side by side with the formal sector, and mostly provides employment opportunities, goods, and services to the lower-cadre income groups of the society. This school of thought is in line with Tokman's (1978) "duality sub-approach" under the "benign" view. Accordingly, informal activities are autonomous, economically efficient and have comparative advantages to similar activities developed in the formal sector.

According to the Dualists, informal activities operate under a separate sector of the economy has distinctive future in the difference between the growth rate of labor demand for jobs in the formal sector, particularly in developing economies. The informal sector does not only provide an alternative platform to meet the rising demand for employment among the urban workforce, but also close the gap in job creation by the formal economy (Schneider, 2005).

Empirical Review

Taiwo, Ayodeji and Yusuf (2012) examined the impact of informal

enterprises on economic growth and development in Nigeria. A survey method was used to gather data from 200 informal sector operators and Managers from five selected local government in Nigeria. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire while the formulated hypothesis was tested using correlation coefficient to determine the respondents' perception on the subject matter. The results of the study therefore revealed that the most common constraints hindering informal businesses in Nigeria are lack of financial support, poor management, corruption, lack of training and experience, poor infrastructure, insufficient profits, and low demand for product and services.

Ogbuanu, Kabuoh, and Okwu (2014) examined the relevance of informal enterprises in the growth of the Nigerian economy. The study employed a time series research design and descriptive method of analysis to investigate the relevance of the informal manufacturing in growth of the Nigerian economy. Data were extracted from relevant publications of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). Graphs were used to enhance descriptive analysis of data values over time. Results showed that the informal manufacturing made sizable contributions to the sustained increases in gross domestic product, sustained more than 7 per cent share in employment for greater part of the 2002- 2012.

Mba and Emeto (2018) examined Issues, Challenges and Prospects of informal businesses in Port-Harcourt City, Nigeria. The study was informed by the high rate of unemployment in the society and the poor performance of micro and small businesses in employment generation. Specifically the study investigated the extent to which poor

financing, inadequate social infrastructures, lack of managerial skills and multiple taxation constitute major challenges in the performance of small businesses and it assumes that government intervention through the provision of financial assistance, social infrastructures and favourable taxation policies will reverse the trend. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics while formulated hypotheses were tested using z - test. Results from the data analysis indicated that poor financing, inadequate social infrastructures, lack of managerial skills and multiple taxation were major challenges confronting small businesses in Port- Harcourt City. In order to ameliorate the situation, the study recommend the following: provision of soft loans to small business operators, establishment of small business funding agency, public/private sector partnership in infrastructural provision.

Oluayemi and Ayodele (2021), examine the nexus between entrepreneurship through informal business formation and the growth of the Nigerian economy. The paper focused on secondary data for the period 1990–2019 for macro parameters including, micro and small scale enterprises, nominal gross domestic product, employment, total labor force and population. Forecasting technique was applied to obtain data for missing trends. Quantitative analytical techniques used include the dynamic method of the error correction model (ECM) and Johansen co-integration test for a long-run correlation. The result shows an increasing number of informal formation which has also led to the growth of the economy and job creation.

Materials and Methods

The researchers utilized the narrative qualitative or narrative textual case study (NTCS) in collecting relevant information for the study. The narrative qualitative method or narrative textual case study method was used by appraising inputs of respondents (primarily in other researches) or secondary data sourced from relevant texts, journals, news magazines, the internet etc., about the role of the informal economy in promoting sustainable development in Nigeria.

Stylized Facts (The Narrative Textual Case Study)

Informal Sector and Sustainability in Nigeria

In emerging economies informality is said to be a widespread and persistent phenomenon that critically affects how fast economies can grow, develop, and provide decent economic opportunities for their populations (Corinne and Leandro, 2020). Sustainable development requires a reduction in informality over time, but this process should be inevitably gradual because the informal sector is currently the only viable income source for billions of people across the globe. Informality therefore is best tackled by gradual reforms such as investment in education, as well as policies that address its underlying causes (Feige, 2013). Therefore, the attacks on the sector based on the premise that it is generally operating illegally and evading taxes should be discarded.

One of the major characteristics of the informal sector is limited or lack of government regulations. Informal sector operators have persistently cash on poor regulations from the authorities to violate the principles of

sustainability in Nigeria, especially in the area of environment leading to environmental degradation in the form of air, soil, water and noise pollution (Abu and Collins, 2024). According to Olubiyi (2023), this development has had serious consequence on biodiversity and the ecosystem of the affected areas. Areas of informal operation commonly refer to as violating the environment include artisanal refineries, artisanal mining, oil palm refining, wood work, leather tanning, among others. Therefore, informal economic activities are often linked to land, water, air and noise pollution on one hand, and are also applauded on the other hand as a cleanser of the environment due to their capability to re-use and recycle waste materials erupted from the formal sector (Emmanuella, Uwaize, Ephraim and Francis, 2021).

This therefore implies that the culture of waste management that include waste recycling, reuse, conversion, separation, reduction, among others could be imbibed in informal sector operations if encouraged in order to advance a green economy. In an attempt to promote climate change, informal manufacturers should be encouraged to desist from using fossil fuel and switch to renewable energy source and environmentally friendly machines and tools. This would not only helped to reduce greenhouse gases emission in their areas of operation, but would also go a long way to reduce respiratory and related ailments associated with such emissions (Abu and Collins, 2024).

Manufacturing in the Nigerian informal sector is largely based on the use of indigenous technology and as a

result, this provides an opportunity for such players in the sector to consider the role their operations could play in promoting sustainable development in the country. This, they can realize by keying into the principles of sustainability through moderating the impact of their operations on the environment, society and the economy, thereby promoting a green economy (Olubiyi, 2023). Promoting a green economy is akin to promoting sustainability which is meant to ensure that resources are utilized taking into consideration equity, justice and fairness, and therefore the need for informal manufacturers to demonstrate consciousness in the application of indigenous technology in their day to day operation.

African countries, Nigeria inclusive have persistently suffer the effect of pollution and abuse of the environment in terms of flooding, deforestation, desertification, food shortages, among others (Sarah, 2020). There is therefore the need for the Nigerian informal economy to take the lead in Africa in order to promote and guarantee environmental sustainability, biodiversity and sustainable development in general and apply resources with moderation taken into consideration the interest of the future generation. Also advocated for Africa is moderation of the use of forest and water resources (Abu and Collins, 2024), while on a general term efforts are geared towards modernizing the application of indigenous technology in the informal sector to promote sustainable development.

Barriers to Upholding Sustainability by Informal Sector Operation in Nigeria

A major problem of informal sector operation is irregular power supply as almost all informal operators generate power on their own using gasoline or diesel at a very high cost and at the expense of the environment. Seeking alternative or green source of power is quite expensive, forcing so many operators to either shut down operation or continue in the use of fossil energy (Olubiyi, 2023).

When citizens cannot find job in the formal sector, the requirement for sustenance forces them to look for labour elsewhere. The alternative is mainly in the informal sector of the economy, where there is no minimum wage and workers are unlikely to pay taxes, have no holiday or labour rights, and frequently work in unsafe conditions. Most of the time, it is difficult for them to obtain microcredit since they lack economic stability and concrete employer-employee tie (Emmanuella, 2011). This does not augur well for sustainability.

The high incidence and persistence of informality, particularly in emerging market and developing economies, is an obstacle to sustainable development according to Adrian and Flor (2020), because of its close but complex links with economic growth, poverty, and inequality, including gender inequality. Informal firms do not contribute to the tax base and tend to remain small, with low productivity and lack of access to finance. Countries or regions with high informality thus tend to grow less than their potential (La Porta & Schleifer, 2014). Informality also deprives governments of the much needed tax income that could be used to improve sustainability.

The inability of the nations to compute activities of the informal sector into their annual Gross Domestic Product computation has been another challenge pose by the informal sector according to Abu, Braimah and Sherifat (2020). Unlike the formal economy, the informal economy's operations are not included in the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As a result, the GDP figure computation is a significant underestimate of the country's concern GDP when the massive informal economy is excluded. Meanwhile, the informal sector may continue to flourish in various situations and excluded from the annual economic output computation.

Improving Informal Economy Role in Promoting Sustainable Development in Nigeria.

Adrian and Flor (2020), Corinne and Leandro (2020) and Olubiyi (2023), put forward the under listed arguments as measures to improving the contribution of the informal economy to promoting sustainable development in Nigeria.

- **Improved access to quality of education:** This is probably the single-most powerful way to get the informal sector players engaged in sustainability. Environmentally friendly operational measures need to be adopted to conserve the use of natural resources, uphold the principles of fairness, justice and accountability. Educational reforms aimed both at enhancing equality of access and ensuring that students remain in school until the end of the secondary cycle are particularly important. Ample technical and

vocational training opportunities will also help.

- **Total overhaul of the tax system design to capture informal operators should be carried out:** It is generally recognized that simpler value-added and corporate tax systems (with lower rates with minimal exemptions and loopholes), as well as low payroll taxes, help reduce tax evasion. Supportive social protection systems, including progressive income taxes and protection for the poorest, help promote equality and address distributional aspects.
- **Policies to enhance financial inclusion by promoting expanded access to bank-based financial services can help promote the role of operators in sustainability:** For informal firms and entrepreneurs, lack of access to finance is a key constraint, stifling productivity and their ability to key into environmentally friendly production measures.
- The provision of workable infrastructures/enabling environment or the deliberate creation of industrial hubs and estates where the much needed environmentally friendly infrastructural facilities are readily provided would go a long way to promote sustainability among informal operators

- Clearly, there is a need for the authorities to embark on a series of measures, interventions, and support to encourage the formalization of these businesses to sustain economic growth and development. As mentioned earlier, the informal sector is too large and important to be ignored. A concerted effort to identify and protect them is crucial for sustainability and economic development because huge potential tax revenue is lost yearly to informality.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The informal economy can be seen as an agent of sustainability through its waste management methods. The de-carbonization policy of fuel subsidy removal by the Tinubu's administration was well intended and aimed at promoting sustainability and alternative energy uses. However, such policy ought to have made provision for a green energy transition in order to avoid the backlashes which have become some its characteristics.

Therefore authorities implementing a green economy just transition should reach out to the informal sector manufacturers and operators with a view to carrying them along as the green economy policy is implemented to ensure sustainable development. This is to ensure that green economy achievements are not regressed and informal operators do not revert back to the old methods of operations

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