THE ROLE OF INNOVATION IN NIGERIA'S POST-COVID-19 RECOVERY

Chiedozie Valentine Oluigbo[1*], Love Emmanuel Adeboye[2]&Wahab Afolabi Ajibola[3]
[1, 3]Welding and Fabrication Engineering Technology Department, Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State.
[2]Science Laboratory Technology Department, Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria.
Email: [1*]olu7wonders@yahoo.com; [2]love.adeboye@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng;
[3]wahab.ajibola@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unanticipated impact on the world, and innovation has been identified as a key aspect of Nigeria's post-COVID-19 recovery. With long-standing economic challenges in Nigeria that precede the pandemic, this article examines the role of innovation during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in certain critical scenarios, and how these scenarios can be sustained and improved to promote COVID-19 recovery. Investment in R&D, investment in Micro, Small, and Medium-size Enterprises (MSMEs) and start-ups, investment in healthcare, investment in digital technology, investment in rural Internet connectivity, and encouragement of remote work are among the scenarios explored. In Nigeria, MSMEs account for up to 96% of all businesses and 84% of all jobs. Despite their enormous contribution to the Nigerian economy, barriers to the sector's growth and development continue to exist. The contributions of the Nigerian government through the Central Bank of Nigeria, which provided credit facilities to households, MSMEs, and the healthcare sector during the COVID-19 pandemic were laudable and should be sustained. In order to consolidate on the gains of the COVID-19 pandemic, various institutions that contributed innovative technology such as locally manufactured ventilators and automated hand washing machines should strive to advance and commercialize them. This study also recommends that the Nigerian government commit fully to investing in health information systems and innovative MSMEs/start-ups, as well as promoting primary health care in all rural communities and that organizations, particularly non-essential workers, embrace the innovative concept of hybrid work.

Keywords: COVID-19, Innovation, MSMEs, Recovery, Investment.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant loss of human life around the world, and it poses an enormous threat to public health, food security, and the workforce. The pandemic has wreaked havoc on the economy and social system (WHO, 2020). Aside from the economic strain resulting from morbidity and death, the World Bank estimates that there have been major economic repercussions, with the world economy falling by 8% because of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2020). Several countries' healthcare sectors were immediately impacted by COVID-19, prompting governments to adopt immediate control measures such as halting cross-border traffic between countries, isolating severely impacted areas, closing schools and businesses, and restricting public movement by encouraging people to stay at home most often (Siriwardhana, 2020). Vaccines were rolled out in countries all over the world to help curb the virus from spreading. Nigeria was also granted a $400 million World Bank credit to scale up its COVID-19 vaccination (World Bank, 2021).

The World Bank had previously projected that the population of poor people in Nigeria was expected to increase from the 85.2 million estimated in 2020 to 90 million in 2022. On its February 2022 report, the World Bank stated that the population of poor people in Nigeria is now expected to rise from the estimated 90 million to 95.1 million in 2022 as a result of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This indicates that the COVID-19 crisis is ramping up Nigeria's poverty rate, with over 5 million more people expected to be poor by 2022 (World Bank, 2022). This calls for the urgent implementation of post-COVID-19 recovery strategies.

COVID-19 jeopardized the ability of Nigerian low-income households and vulnerable communities to generate income to satisfy their basic consumer needs, in addition to its direct health consequence. According to a survey done in April-May 2020, Nigerian households started to experience major job and income losses nearly as soon as the pandemic began. To cope, one out of every two households said they had to cut back on their consumption of food

(Joseph-Raji *et al.*, 2020). The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) had to take steps to reduce the COVID-19 crisis' impact on the economy. On March 16, 2020, the CBN Governor issued a press release announcing the establishment of a N50 billion credit facility for households and MSMEs that have been severely impacted by the pandemic, and later announced an additional N100 billion credit facilities to the health sector for indigenous pharmaceutical industries and health personnel seeking to establish and enlarge their capacity (Kabiru, 2022). While the CBN's proactive measures are quite commendable, much more needs to be done in order for Nigeria to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Innovation was critical in the COVID-19 pandemic response and will continue to be critical in the post-COVID-19 recovery. In this context, we see the impact of innovation continuing in the same manner as during the lockdown for the post-COVID-19 period. The objective of this study was to examine cases in which innovation was crucial both during and after the pandemic. Our estimations indicate that innovations modified public perceptions throughout the pandemic, and that certain innovations should be sustained to aid post COVID-19 recovery.

INNOVATION AND RECOVERY STRATEGY SCENARIOS FOR POST-COVID-19

In this section, we discuss some of the most critical Post-COVID-19 innovative recovery scenarios.

Investment in Research and Development (R&D)

In any country, investment in R&D remains a critical driver of productivity, economic growth, and job creation. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented, the global response was based on lessons learnt from previous disease outbreaks such as the Ebola virus outbreak of 2014 in Nigeria (Abayomi *et al.*, 2021; Otu *et al.*, 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasis was on personal hygiene, which included regular hand washing, the use of hand sanitizers, and the use of face masks as both personal protective equipment (PPE) and a public health measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus (Martinelli *et. al.*, 2021). Some of the prevalent health supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic included ventilators, sanitizers and face masks. Ventilators were in high demand for sick patients. As the global demand for ventilators increased, there was a shortage of ventilators in Nigeria. Individuals, organizations, and government agencies had to make frantic efforts to provide some of the needed health supplies as they adjusted to the realities of the pandemic. Their innovations were made feasible through R&D. In Nigeria, local production of alcohol-based hand sanitizer was achieved (Madu *et al.*, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Many institutions locally made ventilators. The Punch Newspaper of 16th April 2020 reported the ventilator produced by the Federal Polytechnic Ilaro in Ogun State, Nigeria (Oyero, 2020). The Guardian Newspaper also reported other locally invented ventilators by the Nigerian Society of Engineers (NSE) (Nwannekanma, 2020), the National Agency for Science and Engineering Infrastructure (NASENI) (Ogune, 2020), and Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria, Nigeria (NAN, 2020). The University of Lagos also produced a ventilator (The Nation, 2020). The Nigerian military as well produced ventilators using local content and PPE kits for the public (Onyedinefu, 2020). As a post-COVID-19 recovery measure, there is need for individuals, institutions and governments to consolidate on the progress made so far by mass-producing these health supplies and devices. One way to accomplish this is for all parties concerned, particularly the government to continue to invest in research, development and innovation.

Investment in Micro, Small, and Medium-size Enterprises (MSMEs) and Start-ups

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, Nigeria's economy was still recovering from the 2016 recession. Businesses were definitely negatively impacted by the economic downturn caused by COVID-19 (Joseph-Raji *et al.*, 2020). In the last five years, MSMEs in Nigeria have contributed around 48% of the country's GDP, according to the Nigeria Bureau of Statistics. They constitute 96% of businesses and 84% of jobs (Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC), 2020). Despite the enormous contribution of MSMEs to the Nigerian economy, barriers to the sector's growth and development continue to exist. A MSME Survey conducted by Price Waterhouse Coopers in 2020 also showed that the most pressing problem currently facing MSME is obtaining finance. Bank loans are more difficult to obtain by MSMEs than by big corporations. However, MSMEs depend on internal capital or funds from family and friends to grow their enterprises. As reported by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), 65 million enterprises in developing countries, representing 40% of formal MSMEs, have an underserved funding need of $5.2 trillion per year, which is 1.4 times the current rate of world MSME lending (World Bank, 2015). The key drivers behind MSME

growth are considered to be technology and innovation. Emerging technologies and breakthrough innovations, particularly those carried out by start-ups and MSMEs, should be given special attention, with the Central Bank of Nigeria and other Federal Government loan agencies providing the necessary support to help them scale up. The government may explore providing loan support to failing and vulnerable businesses, as well as offering grants to MSMEs/ start-ups to help them recover and improve their capacities. The majority of start-ups and MSMEs in Nigeria operate informally and lack access to the COVID-19 incentives offered by the government. However, they must participate in the post-COVID-19 economic recovery since the majority of them are run by underprivileged workers, women, young people, and other disadvantaged groups. Pure necessity is often the driving force behind innovation, and the COVID-19 crisis created new opportunities across numerous industries. Therefore, in order to take advantage of these rising opportunities in the post-COVID-19 recovery, startups and MSMEs must deploy innovation.

Investment in health-care

COVID-19 was a massive global health emergency. Consequently, it is always a topmost goal to address the health crisis and save lives. As a result, during the pandemic, the main focus was on preventing COVID-19 from spreading and ensuring that Nigerians had access to testing and treatment. In fact, the pandemic might well have displaced other health care services, with COVID-19 straining health systems and lockdown measures limiting or deterring patients from visiting health care facilities (World Bank, 2022). The poor and vulnerable in society, on the other hand, were supposed to get special attention, but this was not the case. The WHO at its 150th session of the Executive Board introduced five organizational priorities of which the second is "to support a radical reorientation of health systems towards primary health care, as the foundation of universal health coverage" (Asma, 2022). In Nigeria, the poor health outcomes and low coverage of basic services highlight the necessity for greater allocation of resources and improved financial protection in the healthcare sector. Nigeria spends less on health than practically every other country across the globe. Health received only 4.5% of the Federal Government's budget in 2018, while total government health expenditure was 0.5% of GDP in 2017 (Joseph-Raji *et al.*, 2020). During the COVID-19 crisis, many countries struggled to maintain an appropriate supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilators, highlighting the need for Nigeria to have adequate manufacturing capabilities for these critical assets as a post-COVID-19 recovery measure. The world's most trusted profession is that of a health worker. During the COVID-19 crisis, their expertise, commitment, courage, and empathy saved countless lives. Nigeria's health issues jeopardize its human capital and economic development and these call for urgent innovative measures in order to aid post-COVID-19 recovery. In light of this, health professionals at various levels need to receive the right training and motivation in order to champion the call for a healthy recovery from COVID-19.

Investment in digital technology

COVID-19 has certainly hastened many businesses' digital transformation initiatives; it has served as a motivator for them to go ahead and accomplish it now rather than later. COVID-19 accelerated digital transformation considerably quicker than many organizational leaders have been able to handle, as a popular joke on Twitter implied. Companies are also embracing cloud access gateway products from vendors like Microsoft, Akamai, and Cloudflare, which provide employees with secure remote access to applications that are traditionally behind the firewall (Branscombe, 2020). Cloud, Blockchain, Internet-of-Things, Machine Learning, and Artificial Intelligence are some of the digital transformation technologies that businesses are adopting as part of their transformation initiatives (De *et al.*, 2020). According to the World Bank, the Nigerian economy can leverage digital data and innovative technologies, develop new content, connect individuals to markets and government services, or deploy new, sustainable business models through investments and innovations (World Bank, 2019). Digital services were critical during the COVID-19 lockdowns. We witnessed instances of digital acceleration all around us, such as digital payments becoming more prevalent than cash, virtual meetings replacing in-person contacts, while virtual religious programs and virtual school sessions became normal routine. As a post-COVID-19 recovery measure, innovative enterprises are leveraging on various digital technologies to promote their businesses and minimize their operational costs. Organizations must integrate digital technologies at various levels as COVID-19 recovery measure. In fact, the use of digital technology will hasten the establishment of innovative working and socialization practices, such as cutting down on commute time, allowing for more flexibility in schooling, and conducting medical consultations remotely. To meet the expectations of the citizens and close the digital divide, the government must expedite the planning of digitalization,

especially in the areas of building capacity, developing digital infrastructure, and providing digital skills and digital literacy.

Investment in Rural Internet Connectivity

In Nigeria, rural areas represent approximately 64% of the population, while urban areas represent only 36% (Reed *et al.*, 2014). The lack of internet connectivity in majority of rural communities has become a problem on a global scale. Approximately 61% of Nigerians residing in these rural areas do not have access to the internet (Mba, 2022). There are numerous reasons for the disparity, which include inadequate telecommunications infrastructure, unaffordable device access and unaffordable Internet access. The pandemic has brought the world to a point where individuals without access to the internet are completely cut off. With severe physical and social restrictions in place, new routines need internet connectivity for the most of services. Nigeria is a developing country where individuals who fall on the wrong side of the digital divide are shut off totally. COVID-19 has created a situation in which internet connectivity appears to be necessary for survival. The COVID-19 pandemic brought attention to emerging trends like e-commerce and teleworking. These trends present opportunities for the economy in rural areas but also pose significant challenges to their implementation. In the post-COVID-19 recovery, the rural areas must be recognized as areas of opportunities, and all players in the telecommunications industry must implement innovative measures to bridge the digital divide. The Nigerian government must therefore step up to its responsibility of providing telecommunication infrastructure in the rural part of the country. Telecommunications giants in Nigeria, such as MTN, Airtel and Glo, on their own part should leverage on the lessons of COVID-19 pandemic to find innovative ways to cover more territories that are rural. These telecom companies may also consider providing free extra data and discounted internet devices to the rural populations (Jain *et. al*., 2020).

Encouragement of remote work

On account of the COVID-19 lockdown, several persons have resorted to using the internet to interact and perform their work tasks while at home. There was a general increase in the use of Internet services when compared to pre-lockdown trends. One of the fastest growing applications during the pandemic was Zoom; meeting participants surged by 2900%, yielding $4 billion in revenue in 2021, a 53% growth year-on-year (Iqbal, 2022). The post-COVID-19 world has seen organizations adopt remote as the “new normal”. Employees are adjusting to this "new normal" when office work is shifted to the home, meetings are conducted exclusively online, and new work routines arise. These shifts have affected almost every institution, whether in government, industry, or society. People and organizations had very little time to plan for, prepare for, and embrace new setups since the changes occurred swiftly; they had to adjust, try, and experiment in order to discover new approaches that had never existed earlier (De *et al.*, 2020). Organizations and their employees must now research and develop innovative ways to increase productivity. To achieve this, most organizations in Nigeria have adopted the hybrid work model, which is a flexible approach that allows employees to split their time between working in the office and working from home. Government Agencies are not also left out. According to the Premium Times Newspaper of 29th November 2021, the Kaduna State Government of Nigeria initiated a four-day working week. All public employees, excluding those in schools and healthcare facilities, work from home on Fridays effective December 1, 2021. The change was intended to assist increase productivity, promote work-life balance, and allow workers to spend more time with their family, rest, and practice agriculture, according to the State Government. This measure also takes into account the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated considerable changes in old working practices and the emergence of virtual and remote working arrangements (Lere, 2021). According to a survey done by Envoy with Wakefield Research in April 2022, 77% of organizations in the United States have already chosen to go hybrid. Furthermore, 56% of those organizations allow employees to select when and how frequently they come into the office (Stein, 2022). Some organizations in Nigeria, particularly those in the major cities of Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt have opted for the hybrid work model because of its concomitant benefits to both employers and employees. However, organizations must make innovation a core value while promoting the hybrid work model. To do this, they must allow employees to devote time and effort to developing new ideas as well as promote an open and honest dialogue amongst employees.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have outlined various scenarios in which innovation played a significant role during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as how these scenarios can be sustained and improved to aid COVID-19 recovery.

Nigeria's unemployment rate has increased from 27.1% in the second quarter of 2020 to 33.3% in the first quarter of 2021, according to a report released by the National Bureau of Statistics in March 2021 (NBS, 2021). This is the world's second-highest rate. However, we recognize that MSMEs and start-ups play a significant role in job creation in Nigeria, and that with the right support and funding, this narrative can be changed. In order to consolidate on the gains of the COVID-19 pandemic, various individuals and institutions that contributed innovative technology should strive to advance and commercialize them. In the long run, this will enable Nigeria to be less reliant on imported health supplies and conserve our foreign exchange.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To effectively prepare for future outbreaks, Nigeria needs to increase its investment in health information systems which is supported through innovation by boosting rural internet connectivity and investment in digital technology.

2. Private investment is required in several R&D and innovation-related sectors, such as the commercialization of locally manufactured ventilators and automated hand washing machines.

3. The Nigerian government must foster innovation by investing in MSMEs and creating a business-friendly environment.

4. The Nigerian government must increase its funding for health and promote primary health care in every rural communities so that the poor and vulnerable in society can have access to basic health care.

5. Organizations, particularly the non-essential workers, should embrace the innovative concept of hybrid work.

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