

NEOLIBERAL POLICIES AND POVERTY INDUCED YOUTH RESENTMENT IN NIGERIA

¹John Moses Maikomo & ²Jessey Dearsley Dabale

*Department of Political Science and International Relations, Taraba State University, Jalingo,
Taraba State*

¹jonmoziz@yahoo.com, ²dearsleyjessey@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examined the impact of neoliberal policies and poverty induced youth resentment in Nigeria, with a focus on their role in deepening economic disparities and triggering social unrest. Since the adoption of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1980s, neoliberal reforms in Nigeria have prioritized market liberalization, privatization, and deregulation in an effort to address economic stagnation and fiscal crises. The objectives of the study were to assess the impact of neoliberal policies on poverty and socioeconomic inequality in Nigeria and to analyse the manifestations of poverty-induced youth resentment in Nigeria. The study adopted ex post facto research design, it drew its data from secondary sources; textbooks, journals, internet etc. Relative Deprivation Theory was used as the theoretical underpinning of the study. The study revealed that while these policies contributed to short-term macroeconomic stabilization, they exacerbated income inequality, reduced public investment in critical sectors like healthcare and education, and increased the vulnerability of marginalized populations. The consequences of these policies are evident in the persistent high poverty rates, regional disparities, and widespread public resentment, which have manifested in protests, social unrest, and political instability. This work also revealed that poverty-induced youth resentment has spurred public discontent, as seen in major protests such as the Occupy Nigeria movement (2012) and the End SARS protests (2020), End Bad Governance protests, highlighting the socio-political implications of neoliberal reforms. The study recommended among others the need for more inclusive economic policies and social protection measures to mitigate the adverse effects of neoliberalism, reduce socio-economic inequality, and foster political stability in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Neoliberalism, Poverty, Socio-economic inequality, social unrest, political instability.*

Globally, neoliberalism has emerged as a dominant economic framework since the late 20th century, emphasizing policies such as market liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and reduced state intervention. Proponents argue that these reforms have fostered economic growth and globalization. Conversely, critics contend that their implications for equity and poverty alleviation have been negative, including widened inequality, weakened public institutions, and deepened socioeconomic vulnerabilities, especially in developing countries (UNDP, 2023; Harvey, 2022). This study acknowledges both perspectives, treating neoliberalism as a contested framework whose outcomes depend on context and implementation

mechanisms. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the adoption of neoliberal reforms under Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1980s, driven by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, was a response to fiscal crises in many nations. The causal mechanisms through which these reforms produced socio-economic outcomes include: (a) reduced public expenditure on health, education, and infrastructure due to fiscal consolidation mandates; (b) currency devaluation raising the cost of imported goods; and (c) subsidy removal increasing household expenditure on essential commodities. While countries like Ghana experienced modest economic growth, the broader regional picture highlighted growing income inequality, reduced access to basic services, and heightened public resentment toward such policies (Akinyemi & Adesina, 2022).

In Nigeria, neoliberal policies gained traction with the adoption of SAPs in 1986 during the Babangida administration. These policies aimed to address the country's mounting external debt and economic stagnation by implementing measures such as currency devaluation, trade liberalization, subsidy removal, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises. It is important to note that the reforms led to short-term macroeconomic stabilization and growth in selected sectors such as telecommunications and banking (Adeyemi, 2023). However, distributional outcomes who gained and who lost require careful examination. The remainder of this study focuses on the socio-economic costs experienced by the majority of Nigerians, without assuming that these costs were inevitable or uniform across all groups. The devaluation of the naira increased the cost of imported goods and inputs, triggering inflationary pressures. This mechanism made basic goods and services less affordable for many Nigerians, with low-income households in non-tradable sectors most affected. The removal of subsidies on essential items such as petroleum products raised transportation and production costs, compressing real household incomes. Furthermore, the privatization of state-owned enterprises, when implemented without transparent regulatory frameworks and accountability mechanisms, created opportunities for rent-seeking and asset stripping. This process concentrated benefits among politically connected elites while displacing workers and exacerbating income inequality (Olaleye, 2022). It is important to state that privatization is not inherently detrimental; rather, its effects depend on the quality of accompanying regulatory institutions.

Public spending cuts in sectors like education and healthcare under neoliberal frameworks further reduced access to essential services. According to the World Bank (2023), over 40% of Nigerians live below the national poverty line. This statistic requires three qualifications: (a) the poverty line is measured at approximately 376,000 naira per adult equivalent per year, a threshold many analysts consider low relative to basic needs; (b) poverty is unevenly distributed, with northern states recording rates exceeding 70% compared to southern states below 20%; and (c) unemployment among urban educated youth (ages 15–35) peaks at 42%, significantly higher than the national average (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). These structural challenges have fueled resentment, particularly among youth, leading to protests such as the 2012 Occupy Nigeria movement against fuel subsidy removal and recurrent labor strikes. However, the causal link between poverty and protest participation requires further empirical testing rather than mere assertion. The intersection of poverty and neoliberalism in Nigeria has also exacerbated regional disparities, with northern Nigeria experiencing higher levels of poverty and unemployment than the south. For the purposes of this study, youth resentment is defined as a sustained emotional and cognitive state of perceived injustice, relative

deprivation, and systemic exclusion, which may manifest as cynicism toward state institutions, withdrawal from civic participation, or support for protest movements. Social unrest refers to collective actions outside institutionalized political channels, including protests, strikes, riots, or communal violence. Political instability indicates frequent changes in governance or policy direction driven by extra-institutional pressures.

While scholars such as Eze and Usman (2023) have noted that inequality has fueled socio-political unrest and heightened tensions between different ethno-religious groups, no study has systematically disaggregated the specific pathways through which neoliberal policies have contributed to youth resentment as a distinct socio-political outcome in Nigeria. Furthermore, existing works treat "youth" as a homogeneous category, ignoring variations by education level, region, and labor market status. This study fills these gaps by integrating economic analysis with political psychology concepts such as relative deprivation and attribution of blame. Based on the foregoing, this study is necessary for three specific reasons. First, it conceptually differentiates "youth resentment" from general "social unrest" or "political instability," operationalizing resentment as a measurable attitude. Second, it tests three causal pathways (unemployment, reduced access to services, and perceived horizontal inequality) rather than merely asserting a correlation between neoliberalism and poverty. Third, it disaggregates youth experiences across northern and southern Nigeria, recognizing that neoliberal impacts are spatially uneven. This study examined the impact of neoliberal policies on poverty and socioeconomic inequality in Nigeria, assessing their role in deepening economic disparities and social unrest. Additionally, it analysed how poverty-induced youth resentment manifests in public discontent, protests, and political instability within the Nigerian context.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Neoliberal Policy

Bruff (2025) defines neoliberal policy as a framework that recognize the worth of large-scale corporate power and monopolistic corporations, rather than promoting genuinely free markets. For Friedman (1962), neoliberal policy prioritises individual freedom of choice, arguing that society must be arranged to protect human beings' social nature through market-based institutions.

Caffentzis (2002) defines neoliberal policies as those applying neoliberal theory to the social realm, including user-fees for health care, education, and water under World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes, as well as TRIPS (Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights) and GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services), which commodify mental activities and human behaviours. Guven (2024) defines neoliberal policy as the Washington Consensus agenda of deregulation, privatisation, and trade liberalisation imposed via International Monetary Fund and World Bank conditionalities. Geiger and Bourgeron (2025) define neoliberal policy through TRIPS as a mechanism that reorganises global pharmaceutical supply chains to enable multinational corporations based in high-income countries to monopolise patent ownership while relegating lower-income countries to lower-value manufacturing roles. Odeh (2024) defines neoliberal policy as "skewed utilitarianism" extensive patent rights that undervalue collective rights, favouring specific stakeholders and neglecting distributional consequences for vulnerable populations.

Cornelissen (2025) defines contemporary neoliberal policy as a mutating hegemonic formation facing profound crisis, noting that while its commonsense appeal has notably waned, neoliberalism is neither dead nor dying. Finally, Wijaya and Jayasuriya (2024) define neoliberal policy today as "militarised neoliberalism," which repurposes security institutions and alliances including security pacts and defence agreements to enable global economic accumulation, arguing that contemporary transformations do not represent a turn away from neoliberalism but rather its reconfiguration through military and security infrastructures.

Concept of Poverty

The perception of what constitutes poverty has unfolded over time and varies amongst nations. Therefore, universally accepted definitions have proven difficult to establish (Akwara et al., 2013). However, poverty is commonly understood through three categories: absolute, relative, and material poverty. Absolute poverty refers to the inability to provide material needs for physical subsistence and human dignity, including food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, education, and employment. As of 2025, the World Bank defines extreme absolute poverty as living on less than \$2.15 per day (2017 Purchasing Power Parity). Relative poverty refers to the inability to satisfy basic needs or participate actively in societal activities, limiting the actualisation of one's potentials. Relative poverty is typically measured as household income falling below a certain percentage (e.g., 60%) of the median income in a given society. Material poverty is the absence of ownership or control of physical assets such as land and other resources.

Contemporary scholarship has expanded beyond these traditional categories. Fragoso (2025) draws on Amartya Sen's capability approach to argue that poverty means more than lacking income: it represents a failure of basic capabilities, meaning a person falls short of securing essential functionings such as being nourished and healthy. The Multidimensional Poverty Index operationalises this approach by measuring deprivation across education, health, and living standards.

According to Nwagwu (2014, p. 22), "to be poor is to be powerless. It also means being despised and looked down upon. It means being treated unfairly. Most significantly, it means lacking things that translate into good physical and mental health." Poverty, therefore, is an abject state in which an individual cannot utilise available resources to improve economically, socially, or politically.

In the view of Oduwale (2015), causes of poverty in Nigeria include environmental degradation, inappropriate macroeconomic policies, low productivity and low wages in the informal sector, large family size, and high levels of corruption. More recent research by Edeh and Ozor (2024) confirms that education and health endowments have significant causal impact on household well-being in Nigeria. Bemgba and Adadu (2025) add that the removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria in 2023 has significantly exacerbated poverty, with rural dwellers disproportionately affected. The effects of

poverty include severe malnutrition, food insecurity, illness, homelessness, depression, high mortality, and high rates of crime and violence.

History of Neoliberalism in Nigeria

Nigeria has seen a transition from a comparative welfare state to an ad hoc welfare state to a fully-fledged free market under the neoliberal economic system. Neo-liberal policies provide a problem for Nigeria since they focus primarily on market efficiency, which the Nigerian system lacks as it has not achieved economic autonomy (Okafor, 2024). At different points in Nigeria's history, governments have formulated economic policies geared towards addressing certain economic needs.

There have been three major economic reform programmes in Nigeria since independence; they include the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree/Indigenisation Policy of 1972, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of 1986, and the recent National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). Recently, the Transformation agenda of the Goodluck Jonathan administration, the Change agenda of the Buhari administration, and the recent Eight Point Agenda of the Tinubu Administration all adopted some neoliberal policies, especially in the area of austerity and involvement of the private sector in the Nigerian economy.

Nigeria's journey into neoliberalism started with the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1970s and 1980s. SAPs were propagated by international financial institutions (IFIs) i.e. the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Fukuyama, 2022; Okonjo-Iweala, 2023). This same period is one characterised by a high economic crisis. The structural adjustment paradigm was deeply rooted in the neoliberal economic philosophy which advocates for the minimisation of government involvement in the economy and a reliance on market forces for economic activities. The period characterises a golden age in Nigeria's economic life; this was the period that saw the country's membership in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and Nigeria witnessed the famous oil boom. As a result of the oil boom, manufacturing and agriculture declined (Adebayo, 2021). During the oil boom, the Nigerian government engaged in excessive spending, corruption, and poor economic management. Due to this, the nation had a severe economic crisis in the 1980s that resulted in significant foreign and domestic debt, large budget deficits, high rates of inflation, smuggling, an increase in crime, and a decline in the material well-being of the vast majority of the population (Eze, 2022).

In a desperate search for solutions, International Financial Institutions advised Nigeria to adopt their structural adjustment program for economic growth to be achieved in the country. The government advanced the following as reasons for adopting the Structural Adjustment Program (i) To restructure and diversify the productive base of the economy to reduce dependence on the oil sector and imports

(ii) To achieve fiscal and balance of payments viability over the period

(iii) To lay the basis for sustainable non-inflationary or minimal inflationary growth; and

(iv) To reduce the dominance of unproductive investment in the public sector's efficiency and enhance the growth of the private sector (Ogunsanwo, 2023).

In the implementation of SAP provisions, the following policies were implemented: privatisation of public corporations, commercialisation of public enterprises, removal of subsidies in various sectors of the economy, trade liberalisation, easing of import processes, and the devaluation of the Nigerian currency, the Naira. Some SAP measures were relaxed by successive military governments but Nigeria's economy kept declining till the return of civil rule in 1999.

Theoretical Framework

Whenever a discourse on neoliberal policies and poverty-induced youth resentment in Nigeria is launched, various theories, models, and frameworks are developed to provide analytical direction. This study is grounded in the Relative Deprivation Theory, which serves as its fundamental theoretical underpinning. The theory explains how individuals or groups experience discontent when they perceive a gap between their expected and actual socioeconomic conditions, often leading to frustration, resentment, and potential social or political unrest. In this study, Relative Deprivation Theory is applied to explain how neoliberal economic policies in Nigeria have contributed to poverty-induced resentment among the citizenry. Gurr (1970), in his seminal work *Why Men Rebel*, describes relative deprivation as the gap between expected and actual socioeconomic and political opportunities. He argues that when individuals perceive a persistent disparity between what they believe they deserve and what they actually receive, frustration arises, which may escalate into collective discontent and, ultimately, political violence.

In the context of Nigeria, the adoption of neoliberal policies such as privatization, subsidy removal, and deregulation has deepened economic inequality, increased poverty levels, and widened the socio-economic divide. As Gurr (2005: p.20) asserts, "constituted authority's negligence often results in structural poverty and inequality within countries, which are motivating factors that cause insecurity, such as organized crime, insurgency, and terrorism." The economic hardship caused by these policies has fueled resentment against the state, leading to various forms of social unrest, including protests, insurgency, and armed banditry.

Birrel (1972) reinforces this perspective, stating that group tensions emerge from the discrepancy between the "ought" and the "is" of collective value satisfaction, a situation that often drives conflicts. Similarly, Davies (1962) posits that political violence is triggered by an insupportable gap between what people aspire to and what they actually receive. He states, "this discrepancy is a frustrating

experience that is sufficiently intense and focused to result in either rebellion or revolution” (Davies 1962: p.5). These insights highlight how economic policies that exacerbate deprivation can instigate large-scale social upheavals.

Adesoji (2012) expands on this argument by asserting that regions suffering from relative deprivation particularly those marginalized in economic and political processes are more likely to engage in violent resistance against the state. He links socio-economic inequality, political marginalization, and lack of access to opportunities to the rise of criminality and insurgency in Nigeria. For instance, the Boko Haram insurgency has been partly attributed to the economic deprivation and lack of opportunities in Northern Nigeria, a situation worsened by neoliberal economic adjustments that have disproportionately affected the poor. Similarly, the militancy in the Niger Delta can be understood as a reaction to the perceived economic exploitation and deprivation of the region despite its vast natural resources.

The impact of neoliberal policies in Nigeria has not only widened income disparities but has also fueled social frustration, making marginalized groups more susceptible to radicalization and anti-state activities. Many economically deprived youths find themselves recruited into insurgency, banditry, and other forms of organized crime, sometimes out of desperation rather than ideological commitment. This reinforces the argument that the state’s failure to provide essential social services and equitable economic opportunities has led to widespread resentment, fostering instability and insecurity.

Thus, the Relative Deprivation Theory effectively explains how neoliberal economic policies have deepened socio-economic grievances in Nigeria, leading to poverty-induced resentment that manifests in various forms of social and political unrest.

Methodology

This study adopted an ex post facto research design, relying primarily on secondary data sources to explore the impact of neoliberal policies on poverty and poverty-induced youth resentment in Nigeria. The use of secondary data allows for a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, historical records, reports, and academic publications related to the subject matter. Key secondary sources include academic journals, books, government reports, policy documents, and publications by international organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Additionally, Nigerian government bodies including the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), the Ministry of Budget and National Planning, and the National Assembly (through legislative records and policy documents) serve as critical sources. Regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African

Union (AU). The study employs a content analysis approach to systematically review and synthesize the findings from these secondary sources. This methodology ensures a broad understanding of the historical and contemporary impacts of neoliberal policies on Nigerian society, while also providing insights into the socio-political consequences of these economic reforms. The secondary sources used in this study are critically analysed thematically to draw connections between neoliberal economic strategies and their role in shaping the social, economic, and political landscape of Nigeria.

Presentation of Data and Analysis

Impact of Neoliberal Policies on Poverty and Socioeconomic Inequality in Nigeria

Neoliberal policies have had a substantial impact on poverty and socioeconomic inequality in Nigeria. These economic reforms have caused significant social upheaval and contributed to the growing gap between the rich and the poor. In 1986, the Babangida administration brought neoliberalism a framework marked by market liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation, and less state intervention to Nigeria through the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). These policies' main goals were to lower the nation's external debt, stabilise the economy, and encourage growth via an open market system. However, the majority of Nigerians, especially the impoverished and marginalised groups, have suffered greatly as a result of the long-term effects. According to recent research, the elimination of fuel subsidies in 2023 and the naira's flotation caused inflation rates to reach 34.19% in June 2024, the highest level in almost three decades, pushing an additional 13 million Nigerians into multidimensional poverty (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; World Bank, 2024). The August 2024 #EndBadGovernance demonstrations, which were sparked by young people's disapproval of these neoliberal changes, highlight the clear connection between economic policy and social unrest in modern-day Nigeria (Ahmed, 2025; Nigeria Labour Congress, 2025; Moses, 2025).

One of the primary consequences of neoliberalism in Nigeria has been the deepening of poverty and exacerbation of economic inequalities. The devaluation of the naira, a key component of the SAPs, led to severe inflation, which significantly increased the cost of basic goods and services. For many Nigerians, this resulted in a marked decline in living standards, as incomes failed to keep pace with inflation. While some sectors, particularly telecommunications and banking, saw growth due to privatization and liberalization, the overall economy remained fragile, and the poverty rate continued to rise (Samuel, 2024). According to the World Bank (2023), over 40% of Nigerians live below the poverty line of \$4.20/day, a direct result of policies that prioritized market forces over social welfare.

A table showing the growing statistics of the poverty index in Nigeria after the adoption of neoliberal economic policies.

Poverty Index in Nigeria after the adoption of Neoliberal economic policies.

Year	Major Policy Context	Poverty Headcount Rate (%)	Remarks
1985	Pre-SAP (Mixed economy)	28%	Prior to neoliberal reforms; poverty relatively low but rising
1986	Adoption of SAP (Neoliberal Turn Begins)	32%	Currency devaluation, subsidy removal, privatization began
1992	Post-SAP Expansion	43%	Increasing inequality and hardship due to continued structural reforms
1996	Continued neoliberal agenda	65.6%	Significant rise; declining real income and growing unemployment
2004	Poverty Reduction Strategy (NEEDS)	54.4%	Emphasis on liberalization and market-led growth under democratic rule
2010	Market-oriented reforms under democracy	62.6%	Persistent poverty despite GDP growth
2015	Post-structural reforms, oil shock impact	53.5%	Slight drop; driven by social programs and oil revenue before recession
2019	Neoliberal continuity, limited state welfare	40.1%	National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) Multidimensional Poverty Measurement
2022	NBS Multidimensional Poverty Index	63%	Over 133 million Nigerians classified as multidimensionally poor
2024	Ongoing neoliberal policy effects	65% (estimated)	Poverty deepens amid inflation, subsidy removal, and currency depreciation

Sources: *World Bank (2023); NBS Reports; Obi (2019) compiled by the authors 2025.*

The table shows a clear and sustained increase in poverty rates in Nigeria following the adoption of neoliberal policies under the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986. Before SAP in 1985, the poverty headcount rate stood at 28 percent. Immediately after SAP was introduced in 1986, poverty rose to 32 percent and continued climbing, reaching 43 percent in 1992 and peaking at 65.6 percent in 1996. Although poverty declined to 54.4 percent in 2004 and further to 40.1 percent in 2019 under democratic governance and some social programs, the Multidimensional Poverty Index of 2022 recorded a sharp increase to 63 percent, meaning over 133 million Nigerians were classified as multidimensionally poor. By 2024, poverty was estimated at 65 percent, driven by inflation, fuel subsidy removal, and currency depreciation. Overall, the data indicates that rather than reducing poverty, neoliberal policies have been associated with a general upward trend in poverty levels over nearly four decades.

The rising poverty shown in the table can be explained by specific mechanisms of neoliberal reforms. Privatization of state-owned enterprises such as NEPA and NITEL, though intended to improve efficiency, often lacked transparency and led to wealth concentration among politically connected

elites, job losses, and reduced public access to essential services (Mustapha & Nasir, 2019). Similarly, cuts in public spending on healthcare and education under neoliberal frameworks increased the cost of schooling and medical care, making these services less accessible to low-income and rural families (Obi, 2019). These economic hardships have fueled repeated social unrest, including the Occupy Nigeria protests of 2012 against fuel subsidy removal, the End SARS protests of 2020 that expanded into calls for economic justice, and the End Bad Governance protests of 2024 against rising living costs (Adesoji, 2019; Akinyemi, 2021). Additionally, neoliberal reforms have widened regional disparities, with northern Nigeria's agrarian economy suffering disproportionately from subsidy removal and market liberalization, leading to greater marginalization, migration, and ethnic tensions (Yusuf, 2022). Consequently, while neoliberalism produced growth in some sectors, it failed to deliver broad-based prosperity, instead exacerbating inequality, weakening public institutions, and leaving the majority of Nigerians struggling to meet basic needs (Adeyemi, 2021).

Manifestations of Poverty-Induced Youth Resentment: An Analysis of Public Discontent, Protests, and Political Instability in Nigeria

Poverty-induced resentment in Nigeria has become a driving force behind widespread public discontent, protests, and political instability. Over the years, the persistent socio-economic challenges faced by a large segment of the population, exacerbated by neoliberal policies, have created a fertile ground for social unrest. As the country grapples with high poverty rates, unemployment, inflation, and inequality, the resulting resentment has manifested in various forms, including protests, calls for political change, and a general distrust of the ruling elites. This discourse explores how poverty-induced resentment in Nigeria has led to the eruption of protests, deepened political instability, and sparked widespread dissatisfaction with the political system.

One of the most visible manifestations of poverty-induced resentment in Nigeria is the occurrence of protests, which have become a regular feature of the country's socio-political landscape. A prominent example is the *Occupy Nigeria* protests of 2012, which were triggered by the government's decision to remove fuel subsidies. This move, which was part of broader neoliberal reforms aimed at addressing Nigeria's fiscal challenges, resulted in a sharp increase in the price of fuel, leading to a surge in the cost of living. For many Nigerians, especially those in low-income households, this policy was seen as an attack on their already strained livelihoods. The protests, which were initially about fuel subsidy removal, soon expanded into broader grievances about corruption, mismanagement, and the failure of the government to address the needs of the people. The widespread participation in the protests highlighted the deep anger and frustration felt by ordinary Nigerians, particularly those who felt excluded from the benefits of economic growth and development (Ibrahim, 2017).

Similarly, the *End SARS* protests of 2020 were another significant example of how poverty-induced resentment can lead to social unrest in Nigeria. While the protests initially focused on police brutality, they quickly morphed into a broader movement against systemic corruption, economic inequality, and governance failures. The underlying resentment was not just about police violence but about the failure of the government to provide basic services, create jobs, and reduce poverty. Many of the young people who participated in the protests were disillusioned with the political system, which they saw as perpetuating their economic hardships while enriching a small political and economic elite. The *End SARS* movement drew attention to the failure of the state to address the socio-economic grievances of the youth, whose prospects for employment and social mobility had been severely limited by the country's economic policies (Nwachukwu, 2021).

Beyond the Occupy Nigeria and End SARS protests, other notable demonstrations have also been catalyzed by economic reforms rooted in neoliberal ideology. The table 1 below highlights key protests in Nigeria linked to such policies:

Year	Protest	Triggering Neoliberal Policy	Key Actors	Impact/Remarks
1989	Anti-SAP Protests	Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP)	Students, NLC, Civil Society	Nationwide riots; repression by military regime
1992	Students' Protests	SAP and hike in fuel prices	NANS, University students	Violent clashes; universities shut down
2000	Anti-Fuel Price Hike Protests	Deregulation and subsidy reduction	Labour unions, civil society	Several deaths; government rolled back part of the hike
2003	National Strike and Protests	Fuel subsidy removal	NLC, TUC, Civil society	Economy grounded for days; dialogue with government
2005	General Protests and Strikes	Fuel price hikes, deregulation	NLC, TUC	Partial concession by government
2012	Occupy Nigeria Movement	Full removal of fuel subsidy by Jonathan government	Youth, Labour, CSOs, celebrities	Major protest; government reinstated partial subsidy
2016	Anti-Hike Protests	Naira floatation, subsidy removal	NLC, CSOs	National outcry, though protests were less sustained
2020	End SARS + Anti-Hardship Protests	Youth frustration, unemployment	Youths nationwide	Combined police brutality and economic discontent

2023	Protests against Subsidy Removal by Tinubu	Fuel subsidy removal and floating of naira	NLC, TUC, informal sector workers Labour unions, CSOs, students	Massive cost of living spike; ongoing resistance and negotiation
2024	Nationwide Strikes and Demonstrations	Economic hardship from neoliberal reforms		Demands for wage increase, social investment

Source: *adopted from Mustapha, & Nasir (2023).*

Public discontent in Nigeria has also manifested in the form of political instability, which has been driven, in part, by poverty-induced resentment. As poverty and inequality continue to rise, the political system has become increasingly polarized, with various groups feeling alienated from the government. This division is particularly evident along regional, ethnic, and religious lines, with some groups feeling that they are being left behind by the political elite. In northern Nigeria, for example, where poverty rates are higher compared to the southern regions, there is a growing sense of marginalization and neglect by the central government. The resulting frustration has fueled political instability, with sporadic outbreaks of violence, ethnic clashes, and insurgencies, including the rise of groups like Boko Haram and banditry, which have become major sources of insecurity in the region. As Akinyemi and Adesina (2022) argue, the economic neglect and political exclusion of northern Nigeria have contributed to the emergence of violent movements, further complicating the country's political landscape.

The persistence of poverty-induced resentment has also led to the erosion of trust in political institutions and the political class in Nigeria. As the country has experienced several democratic transitions since the return to civilian rule in 1999, public confidence in the ability of the government to deliver on its promises has steadily declined. Many Nigerians view the political class as corrupt, self-serving, and disconnected from the realities faced by ordinary citizens. This disillusionment with the political system has created an environment in which political participation is increasingly seen as futile, particularly among the youth. The lack of economic opportunities and the perception that political power is concentrated in the hands of a few elites have led to widespread apathy and disengagement from formal political processes. However, when this apathy gives way to anger, it often results in spontaneous protests or even violent uprisings, as seen in the aforementioned cases (Aderinto, 2020).

The link between poverty and political instability in Nigeria is also reflected in the growing number of protests and strikes organized by labor unions, student groups, and civil society organizations. These protests often focus on issues such as unemployment, the high cost of living, inadequate public

services, and corruption. The persistent frustration with the government's inability to address these issues has led to a volatile political environment, where citizens are increasingly willing to take to the streets to demand change. As Olayiwola (2019) notes, the failure of successive Nigerian governments to create an inclusive economic policy has fueled public resentment and undermined the legitimacy of the political system, making it difficult to sustain peace and stability in the long term.

In addition to protests and political instability, poverty-induced resentment has also had a negative impact on the country's governance, as it has led to the entrenchment of patronage networks and the growth of political clientelism. In an environment where economic opportunities are scarce, political elites often rely on patronage to maintain support and loyalty. This system of clientelism further exacerbates poverty and inequality, as resources are distributed based on political loyalty rather than need or merit. As Adeyemi (2021) points out, this form of governance fosters a sense of resentment among those who feel excluded from the patronage system, leading to further fragmentation of the political landscape.

Poverty-induced youth resentment in Nigeria has significantly contributed to public discontent, protests, and political instability. The country's persistent socio-economic challenges, compounded by neoliberal policies, have deepened inequality and created a fertile ground for social unrest. As poverty and inequality continue to rise, it is likely that these manifestations of public dissatisfaction will become more frequent and intense. Recent empirical research confirms that the #endbadgovernance protests of August 2024 were directly fueled by Nigeria's dire socio-economic conditions, representing a clear manifestation of youth resentment against poor governance and neoliberal reforms (Ahmed, 2025). With nearly 80 million Nigerian youths currently unemployed and over 60% of the population below the age of 30, the country faces a ticking time bomb of youth disenfranchisement and radicalization (Plan International Nigeria, 2025). The Nigeria Labour Congress has documented that the removal of fuel subsidies and devaluation of the naira have pushed an estimated 150 million Nigerians into multidimensional poverty, with real wages obliterated and inflation reaching unprecedented levels (Nigeria Labour Congress, 2025). Civil society organizations have further warned that the rigid implementation of IMF and World Bank-endorsed neoliberal policies continues to exacerbate hunger, hardship, and poverty, while democratic rights are increasingly trampled upon (Joint Action Front, 2025; Falana, 2025). The persistence of these conditions suggests that without fundamental policy reversal or meaningful youth inclusion in governance, future waves of protest and social unrest are highly probable.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study on the impact of neoliberal policies on poverty and socio-economic inequality in Nigeria, coupled with the manifestation of poverty-induced youth resentment, underscores the complex relationship between economic policies, social unrest, and political instability. Neoliberal reforms in

Nigeria, while aiming to stabilize the economy and encourage growth, have exacerbated poverty, income inequality, and socio-economic disparities. These policies, such as the removal of subsidies, currency devaluation, and privatization of state-owned enterprises, have deepened economic hardships for the majority of Nigerians, especially those in marginalized communities. The resulting resentment has manifested in widespread public discontent, protests, and heightened political instability, as seen in movements like Occupy Nigeria (2012) and End SARS (2020), which reflect the frustrations of Nigerians who feel excluded from the benefits of economic growth and governance.

The poverty-induced youth resentment has not only fueled protests but also contributed to the deterioration of trust in political institutions, further destabilizing the political landscape. The polarization along regional, ethnic, and socio-economic lines has compounded the nation's governance challenges, leading to the rise of violent insurgencies, corruption, and a general sense of disillusionment among the populace. The continued failure of neoliberal policies to address the root causes of poverty and inequality has thus led to persistent social unrest, making it increasingly difficult for Nigeria to achieve long-term political stability.

The study therefore, recommended among other things that:

- i. **Adoption of Inclusive Economic Policies:** It is crucial for the Nigerian government to move away from exclusive neoliberal frameworks and implement more inclusive economic policies that prioritize poverty reduction and equitable distribution of resources. Policies that focus on improving access to quality education, healthcare, and affordable housing, particularly for vulnerable populations, can alleviate socio-economic inequalities and reduce the resentment that fuels protests and political instability.
- ii. **Strengthening Social Protection Programs:** To mitigate the impact of neoliberal policies on the most vulnerable populations, the Nigerian government should invest in robust social protection programs. These programs, such as unemployment benefits, social safety nets, and targeted poverty alleviation schemes, can help cushion the negative effects of economic reforms and reduce public discontent.

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