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Political Perspectives of Social Assistance Amidst Economic Shocks in Nigeria

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Economic shocks represent an important dimension of protracted crises characterised by conflict and climate-related extremes. This note examines views of different actors in Nigeria on whether and how social assistance should be used to help households negatively affected by these shocks. It identifies the political outlook of those who view social assistance as: 1) A fundamental right espoused in the social contract focused on marginalised groups; 2) A right but focused on technocratic aspects of delivery; 3) A tool to maintain financial discipline, applied to respond to crises when systems fail; and 4) A means of strengthening political influence. The power of groups with these perspectives offers insights about the underlying constraints of social assistance.

Key messages

- Social assistance (SA) is shaped more by political agendas and fiscal restraint than by rights or the scale of need. Legislators and international financial institutions, who wield significant power, frequently deploy SA as a tool for political leverage, debt management, or to cushion the impact of unpopular reform.
- Key actors hold varying perceptions and levels of power over SA reform. Federal ministries, departments, and agencies perceive themselves as strategic innovators in responding to crises, but face criticism for weak coordination, ministerial reshuffles linked to corruption, and misaligned political incentives.
- Development partners straddle views of SA as a technocratic right and a disciplinary tool. They have power due to funding and technocratic support for Nigeria, but also face coordination challenges and are less actively engaged in critically challenging the status quo.
- Civil society organisations and faith-based and traditional leaders challenge the status quo by advocating for SA as a human right. However, their advocacy is limited in scale, sustainability, and political traction.
- Some perspectives to tackle blockages to social assistance may work within the current situation, for example through strengthening programme coordination by different groups of stakeholders. Other perspectives try to reimagine the system, for example through pushing for resilience-building initiatives that coalesce support from groups advocating social assistance as a right and those seeing its utility as a residual tool.

Background

Social assistance is a critical mechanism for responding to both long-term poverty as well as protracted crises. Crises are often characterised by violent conflict or climate-related disasters, but typically involve a broader set of interrelated pressures. Economic shocks are often under-evidenced in these settings, yet represent an important dimension of multiple, intersecting crises that require tailored responses. Whether and how social assistance can – and should – be used to help households negatively affected by economic shocks is an important policy question.

This note presents research results on the role of social assistance in the context of two major policy reforms introduced in 2023 by the current administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu:

1. **Removal of fuel subsidies:** Introduced to address fiscal inefficiencies and redirect funds toward infrastructure and social development.
2. **Unification of foreign exchange rates:** Free-floating naira aimed at addressing disparities in Nigeria's multiple exchange rate regimes and to stabilise the economy.

These reforms, while introduced to stabilise the economy and reduce fiscal deficits, have had severe socioeconomic repercussions. Inflation rates have soared, the naira has steeply devalued, the cost of living and fuel prices have spiked, and millions have been pushed further into poverty (World Bank 2023; Onyeiwu 2024; David 2024; NOIPolls 2025).

A series of interventions were introduced or expanded by the national government between May 2023 and December 2024, to mitigate the impact of these dual policy shocks. These included cash transfers and the distribution of rice and other goods as relief support. However, their coverage and scale were deemed ineffective by various decision makers, civil society organisations (CSOs), and development partners, each of which held different perspectives on the role of social assistance during crises (Ochogwu 2023; P4, KII, CSO and government).

This briefing note examines the views of different actors in Nigeria on whether and how social assistance can and should be used to help households that are negatively affected by these economic shocks. It is based on key informant interviews (KIIs) with 20 national-level stakeholders (government officials and advisors, donors, CSOs, and business and private sector actors), alongside a rapid review of secondary literature including policy documents and government statements. Data analysis combined thematic analysis of interview data and typological analysis of secondary data, using ATLAS.ti for coding and theme extraction through a hybrid deductive-inductive coding approach.

Social assistance in Nigeria: a system in flux

A defining feature of the current administration appears to be a limited emphasis on developing or expanding social assistance policy or programmes in response to emerging crises. This has been especially marked following the suspension of staff in the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Poverty Alleviation and other government agencies in early 2024 on allegations they had misappropriated funds. The appointments that ensued appear to be more politically charged than rooted in technical competence specific to social protection (Shuaib 2024).

There has concurrently been a shift towards more negative perceptions of social protection and its inherent lack of popularity in Nigeria. A survey revealed that 63 per cent of Nigerians believe the government is performing poorly in tackling corruption, reflecting concerns that funds meant for social assistance and other interventions are frequently mismanaged, leaving intended beneficiaries underserved or excluded (API 2021). Indeed, emergencies can create opportunities for not following due process and established procurement procedures. Against this background, many stakeholders, including policymakers and duty bearers, oppose the allocation of public

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funds for emergency social assistance (Daily Trust 2023; Dyepkazah 2020).

Yet Nigeria has a history of social assistance programmes aimed at addressing poverty. In the military era pre-1999, assistance was largely fragmented and reactive, characterised by ad-hoc relief measures during famines, floods, and economic downturns (Irele 2019). Systematic measures since the return to democracy include the social investment programmes launched in 2016 comprising initiatives such as conditional cash transfers (CCTs), the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme, Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme, and N-Power for youth employment (Okolo and Ledogo 2023; Ogwola *et al.* 2024). Most ideas around the social protection policy, registration, and financing originated in this period as part of efforts to develop a broader social protection system. It marked a period of more will and acceptance of social assistance.

However, the system introduced a decade ago has been fragmented and in flux over the course of different administrations. Underlying these administrative shifts have been fluctuations between more redistributive welfare approaches and market-oriented, fiscally conservative approaches; between southern and northern elites based on changing political coalitions; from federal-led programmes to more state-level innovation and implementation; and shifts in international funding for social assistance. The government's overreliance on loans moreover, such as the US$800 million World Bank credit, has raised concerns about prioritising debt repayment over social welfare (DMO Nigeria 2025).

The centralisation of decision-making power and the perceived inefficacy of engaging at sub-national levels has contributed to uneven outcomes. States with the highest poverty levels, such as Sokoto (90.5 per cent), Bayelsa (88.5 per cent), and Gombe (86.2 per cent), received relatively lower funding across multiple intervention programmes from 2022–25. For example, Sokoto, despite having the highest poverty rate, received only 0.65 per cent of CCTs between August 2018 and April 2022 and 2.11 per cent of the funding as of March 2025. In contrast, states with lower poverty rates often receive higher allocations (FMHAPA 2025). This misalignment suggests inefficiencies in targeting mechanisms, undermining poverty reduction efforts and exacerbating regional inequalities.

While the challenges go beyond the dual policy shocks, social assistance has been severely overwhelmed following these shocks. The absence of an effective coordinating body led to inconsistencies in the delivery of CCTs in 2023 during the dual policy shocks, with only 5.6 million households receiving the first tranche of payments out of the targeted 15 million by March 2025 (Popoola 2025). These gaps highlight deeper issues about how social assistance is prioritised, financed, and governed.

Table 1: Groups of actors with different views on social assistance and power over reform

Framing	Entitlement		Discretionary	
View of Social Assistance and examples of key actors	**Human rights and social justice** **Who:** Nigerian CSOs, INGOs, faith-based and traditional leaders, labour unions, community groups, students	**Rights-based technocracy** **Who:** NBS, NASSCO technocrats, development partners (UNICEF, UNDP, ILO, World Bank, etc)	**Residual and disciplinary tool** **Who:** Ministry of Finance, some development banks (IMF, AfDB, WB), small business associations, macroeconomists	**For political influence** **Who:** Local elites, politicians, Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs & Poverty Reduction, state-level SP offices
Power	Low	High	Medium-high	High

Source: Authors' own.

Actors' views on social assistance

The outcomes above are shaped by the differing perspectives and power dynamics of key actors. The analysis highlights distinct categories of political outlooks of social assistance with varying degrees of power, summarised in Table 1 and elaborated below. Power in this context refers to the capacity of these groups of actors to shape the direction of social assistance reform, whether through formal authority or informal influencing.

A. Social assistance as a legal and human right

Nigerian CSOs, international/national non-governmental organisations (I/NGOs), and faith-based and traditional leaders view social assistance as a fundamental right and advocate for its expansion among marginalised groups. Faith and traditional leaders use their moral authority to influence followers, advocating for societal change (BusinessDay 2024; P7 KII CSO). CSOs instead call for broader accountability and inclusivity in programme design, aiming to empower marginalised voices in policy decisions (Tyohemba 2024). Both groups seek reform, but their methods and motivations differ. Faith and traditional leaders emphasise moral obligation and expanded coverage, while analysis of the KIIs suggested that CSOs and I/NGOs push for systemic reform that strengthens governance, enhances participation, and reinforces rights-based frameworks.

Two-thirds of the KIIs emphasise the significant role Nigerian CSOs play in providing feedback to the government on what is working, who is hurting most, and what will be most effective in reducing the impact of current economic policy shocks. The KIIs noted that CSOs draw from their role in running community social assistance projects in various states to share information about best practices in targeting and inclusivity. CSOs are seen as a legitimate expression of the people's representation and perceived by the KIIs as filling gaps in social assistance during policy shocks:

> *Civil society groups help bridge the gap between the policies on paper and the realities in the communities.*
> (P11, KII, NGO)

> *When government bodies are slow to respond, CSOs step in to provide immediate relief and ensure the continuity of services.*
> (P7, KII, CSO)

Their advocacy role was highlighted. For example, CSOs, alongside active citizens, politicians, and other actors, have attacked the government's cash transfer and food distribution programmes due to targeting errors, the inadequacy of rice distribution, and allegations of corruption (Olaniyi 2023). Domestic movements such as #EndBadGovernanceInNigeria complement these efforts, focusing on grassroots mobilisation and direct citizen empowerment for immediate governance reforms (Oyero 2024). INGOs, like Oxfam Nigeria and Save the Children International, instead aim to mobilise global solidarity and advocate for poverty alleviation during and beyond Nigeria's economic crisis by addressing inequality and systemic causes of poverty (Oxfam in Nigeria 2025).

Finally, labour unions, community organisations, and student associations interpret social assistance within a broader social contract between the state and its citizens, tied to political legitimacy. Organised labour, in particular, has long argued that social assistance should be institutionalised alongside minimum wage protections, pension reform, and broader redistributive policies to address structural poverty (P19, KII, government). The community-based groups and student union representatives interviewed echoed this, framing cash transfers, subsidies, or fee reductions as government obligations, especially during crises. Unlike CSOs who emphasise rights-based advocacy and technical partners who rely on data-driven arguments, they tend to deploy more confrontational strategies — strikes, protests, and collective bargaining. While powerful during mass mobilisation, their pressure often fades once immediate demands were negotiated (P10, KII, CSO).

B. A right enshrined in technocracy

Development partners, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), and KIIs in the National Social Safety-Nets Coordinating Office (NASSCO) reaffirmed a commitment to viewing social assistance as a human right, although their focus is on technical assistance and upholding global best practices (FMB&NP 2021; UNICEF 2024; P20, KII, government). KIIs viewed development partners as technical assistance leaders whose cooperation, funding and data provision drive government responsiveness (P7, KII, CSO). Consequently, international organisations have considerably influenced federal and state-level poverty reduction initiatives targeting demographics made vulnerable by economic shocks (P5, KII, government).

> *Partners such as World Bank, UNICEF, and UNDP, impacted immensely in response to shocks during the Covid-19 pandemic, which cash transfer targeted poor and vulnerable households, rural women and persons with special needs. It also help the government save costs by identifying and targeting eligible beneficiaries for interventions* (P5, KII, government)

At the same time, a recurring theme is the disconnect between technical data produced by development partners, advisory ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), and decision-making processes, leading to inefficiencies in programme design and delivery. The case of the NBS was put forward by four KIIs that noted that though NBS collaborates with international organisations to generate poverty data, its inputs are not seen as central to policy processes. According to KIIs, decision makers are slow to respond to technical information and seem to make decisions without reference to this data.

C. Social assistance as an instrumental, often residual macroeconomic tool

Another outlook viewed social assistance as an important macroeconomic tool but residual for use only when markets fail. This category contains international financial institutions (IFIs), the Ministry of Finance, and small business associations with varying clout. The category regularly advocates for or implements fiscal reforms aiming for market stability and growth. IFIs such as the World Bank, IMF, and AfDB, along with technocrats in the Ministry of Finance, tend to view social assistance through the lens of macroeconomic stability (P15, KII, government). Informants noted that the strongest examples of this logic are cash transfers tied directly to subsidy removal packages (e.g. in 2016, 2020, and 2023),

> **"Many stakeholders, including policy and lawmakers, oppose the allocation of public funds for emergency social assistance."**

where social assistance is positioned as a tool to contain resistance to reform (P20, KII, government; P14, KII, private sector). Organised private sector actors, however, seek fiscal reforms that indirectly assist in unemployment reduction (Nwafor 2025). While all view social assistance as a residual tool, the private sector's approach is indirect, emphasising broader economic gains.

Several interviewees highlighted that this broader group of actors wield significant power because of Nigeria's dependence on international loans and technical support. The Ministry of Finance's alignment with the IMF and World Bank recommendations reinforces this perspective, creating an elite consensus that accepts temporary social assistance as a pragmatic necessity rather than a permanent feature of the welfare system. However, the trade off is that such interventions are often short term, top down, and poorly embedded in domestic institutions. As a result, international financial discipline actors reinforce a vision of social protection that is reactive, reform-dependent, and vulnerable to reversal once fiscal consolidation goals are achieved (P2, KII, goverment).

D. Social assistance for political influence

A final category of views is represented by politicians, elites, and opposition actors. Many stakeholders, including policy and lawmakers, oppose the allocation of public funds for emergency social assistance. These challenges have created fertile ground for other actors to advocate for change. For political opposition actors, incentives are tied to gaining public support and political credibility by critiquing government policies, such as the lack of transparency in subsidy savings (P13, KII, state government; Seye 2025).

Instead, ruling party officials and political appointees appear constrained by the urgency of responding to immediate economic shocks, navigating reliance on social assistance as a residual macroeconomic tool, and of the importance in consolidating political influence. Ruling party officials within the All Progressives Congress party (APC) are furthermore driven by the need to defend their policies while addressing criticisms of high poverty rates and limited programme effectiveness. Their incentives include maintaining political stability and support, often using social assistance as a strategic resource in this process, while navigating policy critiques (Olumide 2024).

The four big political outlooks of social assistance outlined above point to very different ideas in play, associated with a wide variety of stakeholders in the policy space. It is important to surface these competing stakeholder outlooks as efforts at reform are otherwise bound to get stuck if they do not seek how to negotiate their very different positions. The next section outlines how tackling blockages to social assistance begins with identifying strengths and weaknesses of these different groups of perspectives, which is a step towards overcoming tensions between competing interests to build consensus for effective reform.

Tackling blockages to social assistance

The power of groups with these perspectives offers insights about underlying constraints of social assistance. KIIs, especially with the government, viewed MDAs as strategic innovators coming up with solutions to crises:

> *Government agencies are at the forefront of these programmes, but there are gaps in coordination between various ministries, which sometimes affects the effectiveness of the interventions.*
> (P1, KII, government)

The effectiveness of government is often hindered according to KIIs by ‘bureaucratic inefficiencies’, ‘lack of coordination’, and ‘political changes’ (i.e. frequent ministerial reshuffles), underpinned as noted above by limited will for reform. Various ministries and agencies, such as the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, operate independently. With no single body overseeing social assistance programmes, roles and responsibilities frequently overlap, causing delays and misallocations. For example, initiatives like the National Social Safety Net Programme and the Nigeria Covid-19 Action Recovery and Economic Stimulus programme lack alignment or central oversight, leading to fragmented delivery during and since the Covid-19 pandemic. Limited data integration also constrains a unified approach to beneficiary identification (Ewepu 2024). The proposed National Social Protection Network, which could streamline efforts, remains unrealised four years after its recommended establishment. Relatedly, the National Social Register has failed to identify many households newly affected by inflation and currency devaluation, limiting its credibility (P3, KII, CSO).

Financial discipline advocates have structured engagement with policymakers, resource access, and alignment with economic agendas. They tend to have more resources than NGOs or CSOs, enabling sustained and impactful engagement with policymakers around economic reform agendas (P6, KII, CSO). However, KIIs perceived social assistance reform to be beyond their core priorities, and so they remain outside the purview of pushing for inclusive social protection systems.

Coming to rights-centred categories of outlooks, other challenges emerge. Development partners, despite having high power due to the funding and technocratic support they bring, lack coordination according to KIIs and so are not unified in their approach. Though they provide support, they are less engaged in critically challenging the status quo. Finally, KIIs reflect that the strengths of CSOs in providing this challenge function is offset by limited scale and effectiveness in lobbying power, and they are frequently overlooked or not taken seriously by decision makers.

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Recommendations

How might blockages to SA be tackled, or what perspectives might support more effective assistance? Some perspectives may work within the current situation, while others try to challenge or reimagine the system. Both offer possible entry points for change.

Work within the system

- Strengthen programme coordination – amongst both MDAs and development partners – to enhance coherence and improve public trust. To support this, foster collaboration among government MDAs, development partners, and CSOs to ensure that interventions are inclusive, transparent, and effective. The Social Protection Donor Working Group could serve as a template for creating collaborative platforms that involve all stakeholders.
- Increasing transparency in governance and programme implementation is an important component to rebuild trust amidst allegations of corruption and mismanagement around the distribution of palliatives. Developing impact evaluations of existing interventions can help tackle this trust deficit and enhance transparency.
- Coordination to expand SA coverage requires financial support including robust domestic financing mechanisms, of which the recent Humanitarian Trust Fund is a promising step (Agbakwuru 2023). Implement targeted tax measures to support this fund, such as progressive income taxes or taxes on luxury goods, to generate additional revenue for social protection programmes (P12, KII, private sector). A pro-poor tax on high-end consumer goods could provide a steady funding stream for poverty alleviation initiatives.

Challenge or reimagine the system

- Legislation that guarantees SA as a legal right can help shift the discourse from patronage to accountable governance, but would require more coordinated challenges to the existing status quo across the categories noted above.
- To help support this agenda incrementally, pushing for resilience-building initiatives may be a means of consolidating support across diverse perspectives. Resilience-building initiatives in the social protection space are complex, requiring coordinated sequencing that may be difficult to implement in a low-capacity environment. However, they may fit the political economy of SA in Nigeria better, especially given that they could help coalesce support from groups advocating for SA as a right and those seeing its utility as a residual tool.
- Resilience-building initiatives, such as skills training, microfinance programmes, and climate-resilient livelihood support can reduce long-term dependence on SA. Expanding SA programmes to include targeted skills training for youth in informal sectors could enhance economic resilience.
- Programmes should be designed to address both economic and environmental vulnerabilities, particularly for rural communities affected by climate-related shocks. In flood-prone areas like Borno State, SA measures could include disaster-preparedness training and support for climate-resilient farming practices.

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