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ADEGBENLE A. Semiu

# FASHIONING NEW WAYS OF SURVIVAL:

SMALL BUSINESSES' RESPONSE TO  
THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF  
COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN IBADAN,  
SOUTHWEST NIGERIA



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# IFRA-NIGERIA WORKING PAPERS SERIES

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## **FASHIONING NEW WAYS OF SURVIVAL: SMALL BUSINESSES' RESPONSE TO THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN IN IBADAN, SOUTHWEST NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

The global outbreak of COVID-19 and the various government policies designed to curtail its spread affected local ways of doing business across the world. Like in other countries affected by the virus, the Nigerian government imposed a partial lockdown in key states of the federation; recommended social distancing and made compulsory the wearing of face masks in public spaces in a bid to contain the virus. These precautionary measures put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19 had destabilizing implications for the country's small businesses that were suddenly compelled to close shop or work from home. This preferred government approach was particularly disruptive to small entrepreneurs in the informal sector whose livelihood is tied to their daily or weekly incomes. Against this background, this study explores the varieties of ways in which the Nigerian small enterprises, specifically those based in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State, responded to the economic disruption occasioned by COVID-19 containment protocol. Undoubtedly, this particular area was gravely affected since economic activities are largely dependent on different transactions in and around tertiary institutions, government establishments, as well as their allied industries. Drawing on oral testimonies and through participant observation in the study area conducted between April and December 2020, this study foregrounds the various survival strategies adopted by operators of small businesses and

their implications on the economy, as well as containment, of COVID-19 in Ibadan, southwest Nigeria.

## Introduction

Nigeria recorded its first case of COVID-19 on 17 February 2020 after the virus had earlier registered its presence in most major cities of the world.<sup>1</sup> Though the existence of the virus was well known by December 2019 and the World Health Organisation (WHO) had declared it a global health crisis, it was apparent that the Nigerian government was underprepared for its eventuality. This ill preparedness manifested itself in the lack of a coordinated approach by the various levels of government at the onset of the first index case. State governments and selected government ministries took the initiative to impose sweeping social restrictions in a bid to control the pandemic. For example, the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) initially closed all tertiary institutions for one month, beginning from 23 March 2020.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Lagos, Oyo and Ogun States' imposed strict preventive measures on large gatherings in March 2020 in a bid to manage the spread of the virus. Part of these measures include mediated curfew, compulsory use of face masks in public spaces, social distancing and the use of hand-wash, as well as hand sanitizers. On 29 March 2020, the central government gave legitimacy to these measures when it acceded to the lockdown of Ogun, Lagos and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. There is no gainsaying that these preventive measures were inspired by "borrowed paradigms" that had been implemented in China, United States and Europe. Be that as it may, the enforcement of COVID-19 containment measures brought severe economic hardship on Nigerians as it swelled the number of the

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Ajibo, "Effect of COVID-19 on Nigerian Socio-economic Well-being, Health Sector Pandemic Preparedness & the role of Nigerian Social workers in the war against COVID-19," *Social Work in Public Health* 35, no. 7 (2020): 512.

<sup>2</sup>National Universities Commission, "Management of the Corona Virus (COVID-19) Pandemic," Retrieved from: <https://www.nuc.edu.ng/management-of-the-corona-virus-COVID-19-pandemic/> [Accessed 2 February 2020].

population living in poverty.<sup>3</sup> Whereas civil servants were able to receive their salaries while staying/ working from home, private companies affected by the lockdown had to cut down their workforce as the economy slipped into recession during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, scholars and research agencies have committed vast resources to understanding its prognosis and economic impact. These include specific studies that have focused on the economic impact of the virus on the Nigerian economy and elsewhere. Among these are: Peterson K. Ozili (2020), "COVID-19 Pandemic and Economic Crisis: The Nigerian Experience and Structural Causes;" Ozili Peterson K. (2020), "COVID-19 Pandemic and Economic Crisis: The Nigerian Experience and Structural Causes;" Nwabueze Prince Okenna (2020), "Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Nigerian Economy;" Henry Ajibo (2020), "Effect of COVID-19 on Nigerian Socio-economic Well-being, Health Sector Pandemic Preparedness and the Role of Nigerian Social Workers in the War Against COVID-19;" and Kwaw Andam, Hyacinth Edeh, Victor Oboh, Karl Pauw, and James Thurlow (2020), "Impacts of COVID-19 on Food Systems and Poverty in Nigeria." Of special interest to this study is the UNDP's "Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: An Economic Analysis"<sup>5</sup> that was published in the first quarter of 2020. This paper provides a brief background of the virus and its disruptive implication on economies like Nigeria where scarce resources could complicate the supply of essential commodities while disrupting the large informal sector. It is expected that such disruption would lead to job loss, civil discontent and psychological stress. To ameliorate this, the UNDP recommended a pro-poor palliative regime to help cushion the effect of the pandemic. However, due to weak databases and scarce resources, governments were unable to effectively implement this recommendation.

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<sup>3</sup>Kwaw Andam, Hyacinth Edeh, Victor Oboh, Karl Pauw & James Thurlow, ""Impacts of COVID-19 on food systems and poverty in Nigeria," *Advances in Food Security and Sustainability* 5 (2020): 165

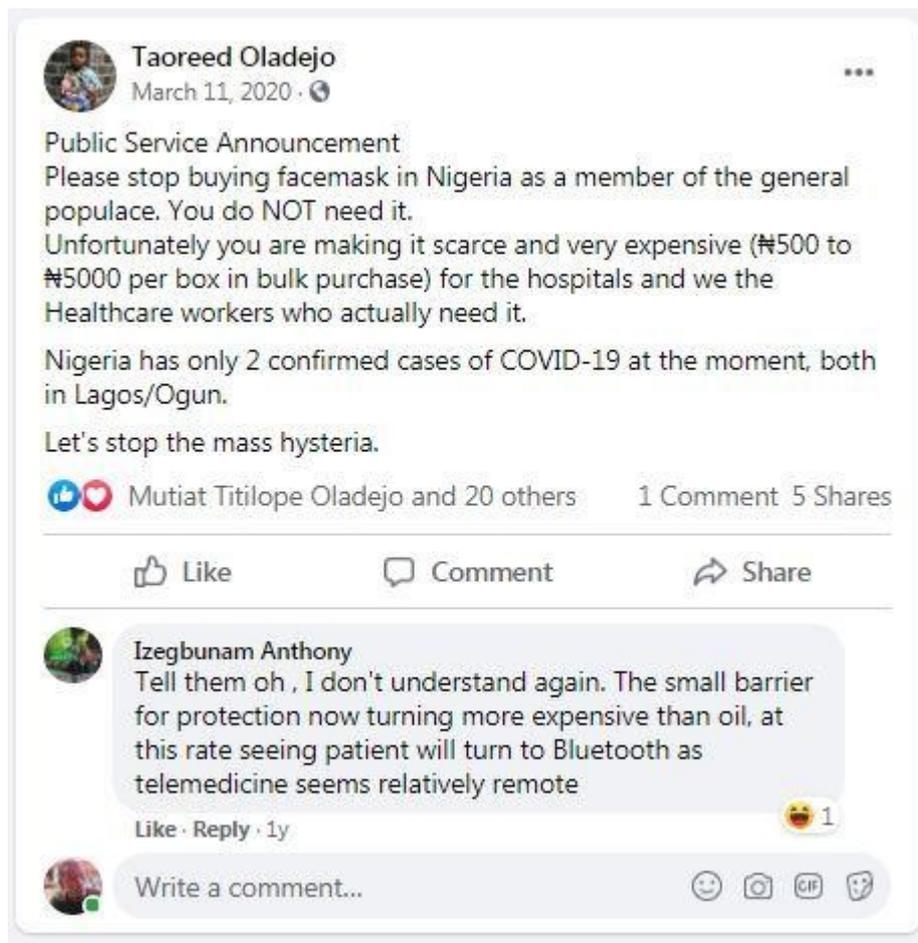
<sup>4</sup>Mathias Okwe, "Nigeria slips into another recession under Buhari," *The Guardian*, 21 November 2020. Retrieved from: <https://guardian.ng/news/nigeria-slips-into-another-recession-under-buhari/> [Accessed 12 December 2020].

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Programme, "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: A Socio-Economic Analysis," *Brief #1* March 24 2020, 1-12.

Against this background, this study adds to the current discourse on the economic impact of COVID-19 on Nigeria while showcasing the survival strategies adopted by small businesses during the pandemic. As would be seen in this study, state initiatives proved unreliable in delivering social protection for the country's poor during the various phases of COVID-19 lockdown and many vulnerable individuals had to fashion new ways of survival in order to provide for themselves and their dependents. By critically interrogating the local face mask production and its value chain; this study shows the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small Nigerian businesses and the survival strategies adopted by local dressmakers, transporters and traders in weathering the pandemic. It is worth noting that the development and consumption of the cloth face mask was a direct response to the shortage of clinical facemask and government insistence on its usage in public space. Prior to the compulsory enforcement of facemask usage in Nigeria, the decision of producing countries to restrict the exportation of this medical commodity had created scarcity in Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> This scarcity was further compounded by the "mass hysteria" created by the craze for essential commodities alleged to offer protection against Coronavirus (Figure 1). Here, surgical face mask featured prominently in this new demand as exemplified by a Facebook post by Dr. Taoreed Oladejo, Consultant Maxillofacial Surgeon at National Orthopaedic Hospital Dala Kano, Nigeria:

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<sup>6</sup>United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, "COVID-19 and Export Restriction: The Limits of International Law and Lessons for AfCFTA," *United Nations* 19 May 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/coronavirus/COVID-19-and-export-restrictions-limits-international-trade-law-and-lessons-afcfta> [Accessed 12 December 2020].



**Figure 1: Facebook Post by Taoreed Oladejo, 11 March 2020.**

There is no gainsaying that the exponential rise in the price of essential commodities like face masks, hand-sanitizer, face shield, personal protective equipment (PPE), and manufactured articles had a destabilizing effect on Nigeria's economy. It is apt to say that the imposition and subsequent relaxation of the social lockdown created a "pandemic economic or pandonomics"<sup>7</sup> that disrupted the livelihood of many small businesses, amplified the profitability of some, while creating new opportunities for others. Peter A. G. Van Vergeijk conceives pandonomics as the "impact of health policies on the economy as well as the response of economic policymakers to the health policy shock by means of fiscal and monetary policies."<sup>8</sup> Businesses like textile trades, events management,

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<sup>7</sup> Peter A. G. Van Vergeijk, *Pandemic Economics* (Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2021), 43.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

outdoor services, mobile gadget retailers, private school teachers, newspapers vendors, stationery sellers, and so on were all gravely affected by the lockdown. Evidence gathered from Ibadan, southwest Nigeria brings to bare the dynamic economic impact and survival strategies of small businesses adopted during the pandemic. This would be the focus of this study.

## **Methodology**

This study relies on COVID-19 data collection sponsored by the Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA) du Nigeria. The data collection combined ethnographic surveys, key informant interviews and participant observations of small businesses within Ibadan North Local Government Area, Oyo State between 2 April 2020 and 31 December 2020. The study area is an urban space that is dominated by tertiary educational institutions i.e. University of Ibadan, Dominican University and The Polytechnic, Ibadan; banks, markets, malls, and government establishments. The local government is also, arguably, one of the most affected polities in Oyo State by the lockdown due to the sudden closure of institutions learning in accordance with COVID-19 containment protocol, as well as the pronouncement of a workers' strike by the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities on 23 March 2020. Subsequently, the state government imposed curfew on public spaces like markets, public schools and other forms of public gatherings. This containment policy destabilized the local economy, especially those in the informal sectors that relied on students' patronage and window shoppers. Small business owners in the fashion, trade, and transport sectors were interviewed to generate nuanced perspectives on the impacts of COVID-19 lockdown on their livelihood. This is supplemented with extant literatures on COVID-19, entrepreneurship and press reportages to produce the economic impact of COVID-19 on Ibadan, southwest Nigeria.

# The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic and the Survival Strategies of Small Businesses

Prior to the imposition of COVID-19 lockdown, Nigeria had one of the worst poverty rates in the globe.<sup>9</sup> A conservative estimate puts the number of Nigerians under poverty as 82.9 million, representing about 40% of the population.<sup>10</sup> Though a resource-rich country, the impoverished status of its masses has been attributed to its restrictive political economy and rentier state.<sup>11</sup> Due to these factors, the formal sector has low absorptive capacity, thus compelling many to seek employment in the informal sector. Indeed, the informal sector remains the only source of income to a sizeable fraction of Nigerians who work as dressmakers, mechanics, tailors, transporters, cobblers, retailers, farmers, hair stylists, carpenters, welder, blacksmith, repair-men, push carts, to mention but a few. For these individuals, their livelihood is tied to the daily or weekly income they earn from selling their services and/or articles. Unlike urban commercial centres like Lagos that is well linked to the global markets and offering more formal employment, traditional cities like Ibadan is “further removed from both markets and the competition of formal sector”;<sup>12</sup> thus implying that the informal sector is the largest employer of labour in the study area. Without access to a predictable income or monthly salary, the workers in the informal sectors are at the mercy of market forces and their livelihood is precarious.

Outside Ibadan, the COVID-19 had a devastating impact on the global economy. On the macro level, this meant a reduction in projected oil revenue for primary goods exporters like Nigeria.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the country's economy slipped into recession some months after the outbreak of the pandemic. It should be added that the drop in oil revenue affected the government's ability

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<sup>9</sup>Anote Ajeluorou, “After living in denial, NBS confirms Nigeria’s poverty capital status,” *The Guardian*, 15 May 2020. Retrieved from: <https://guardian.ng/politics/after-living-in-denial-nbs-confirms-nigerias-poverty-capital-status/> [Accessed 12 December 2020].

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Lewis, "From Prebendalism to Predation: the Political economy of decline in Nigeria," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 34, no. 1 (1996): 98-99.

<sup>12</sup> Helmut K. Anheier, "Economic Environments and Differentiation: a Comparative Study of Informal Sector Economies in Nigeria," *World development* 20, no. 11 (1992): 1575.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Development Programme, “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria,” 7.

to regularly pay workers' salary and to meet the Forex demands of importers.<sup>14</sup> It is equally interesting to note that many small business owners in Ibadan alluded that they were not immediately affected by the destabilization of the macro economy as the economy was already hanging on the thread before the outbreak of the pandemic.<sup>15</sup> What affected their livelihood was the various pandemic containment measures put in place to manage the spread of Coronavirus and not the shortage of forex. According to a respondent (dressmaker) in Bodija Ibadan:

“Before the Corona pandemic, there was work and everything was progressing normally. Actually, the Nigerian economy itself was experiencing difficulty and if the economy is weak, it usually has adverse effects on tailoring...You know that when the government made lockdown announcement, it automatically affects everyone. I also shut my shops and lived on the savings that I have. It is after exhausting our savings that people now started complaining that the government should open back business... I was seriously affected. It's not a joke. It's not a joke at all...”<sup>16</sup>

From the quotation above, the respondent establishes the relative insularity of the informal sector to the development in the global economy. Whereas this could be partly true, it should be stressed that forces of globalisation have reduced the world to a global village and the impact of some events takes longer before they register their presence in some location. For instance, the federal government imposed social lockdown on Lagos, Ogun and the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja on 30 March 2020. The first phase of the lockdown was originally expected to last two weeks, but this was further extended as the cases of infection surge. Whereas the federal government sanctioned social lockdown did not include Oyo State, civic miscommunication and public hysteria compelled many to observe the two weeks lockdown at home. For informal workers, this translated to a disconnection from their source of livelihood, and many, like the respondent above, had to fall back on their savings or market stock. Worst still, the closure of educational institutions and the workers' strike caused by ASUU meant that the market was unlikely to pick up after the end of the first phase of the

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<sup>14</sup> Nwabueze Prince Okenna, “Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Nigerian Economy,” *International Journal of Engineering Applied Sciences and Technology* 5 no. 3 (2020): 118.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Male Dressmaker 3, Bodija Ibadan, 7 August 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Male Dressmaker 3, Bodija Ibadan, 7 August 2020.

lockdown. A respondent (trader) affirmed this during an interview conducted at Bodija that:

“As you can see, this present area that I am in is largely a student area. These students have all gone home due to the school instructions that they should leave. So, some of these products are not moving and the few sales that I make are used in feeding myself and the children. All these expenses are funded from the market sales I make. But now that market sales are low, some sold product’s money has been spent on feeding.”<sup>17</sup>

Here, the precarity of the informal worker is evidenced in the lack of separation between capital and income; as well as the disruption of the market by government policy. During the pandemic, some small businesses collapsed due to low rate of sales and family consumption and exhaustion of edible stocks. On the other hand, those with non-edible stock had to sell their products at a loss in a bid to generate income to fend for their family. This invariably affected capital and operating stock to keep the business running when the lockdown was relaxed. It is arguable that with better access to credit facilities, such small businesses would have stood better chances of survival.<sup>18</sup>

The federal government, through the Central Bank of Nigeria provided conditional cash transfer and economic stimulus package to vulnerable families and businesses affected by the lockdown. Notwithstanding, small businesses were rendered disadvantaged due to their lack of a corporate affairs commission registration. Some vulnerable persons also claimed that they were unable to access the COVID-19 palliative due to poor government logistics.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, it is on record that businesses with substantial capital easily moved their business Online in a bid to exploit the social restriction and market closure. This was done through the development of mobile applications and/or internet websites to serve as an outlet to interact with potential customers (see

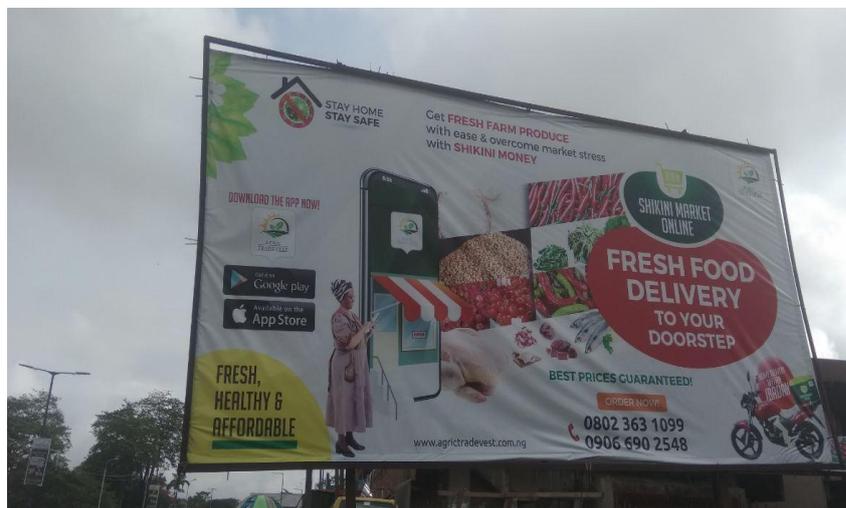
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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Trader 1, Bodija Ibadan, 7 August 2020.

<sup>18</sup>Offiong Helen Solomon, “Accounting for the Size of the Informal Sector in Nigeria,” *South African Journal of Economics* 79, no. 4 (2011): 472-473.

<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Akinwotu, "Lagos's poor lament Covid fallout: 'we don't see the virus, we see suffering'," *The Guardian*, 14 August 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/14/lagoss-poor-lament-Covid-fallout-we-dont-see-the-virus-we-see-suffering?> [Accessed 1 August 2021].

Figure 2 & 3). Since most small businesses lack access to the financial or technical expertise to explore this option, they relied on their savings or stocked product during the first two lockdowns. Close to the termination and subsequent relaxation of the lockdown, it behoves on small businesses to fashion new ways of survival in order to eke out a living in the pandemic economy.



**Figure 2: Billboard of AgricTradeVest, an e-commerce platform that sell food commodities. Located at University Crescent, Bodija Road. 9 August 2020. Source: Author.**



**Figure 3: Local Buka, a local food eatery that offers home delivery. Located at University Crescent, Bodija Road. 9 August 2020. Source: Author.**

With this in mind, it is worth stressing that new opportunities presented themselves for small businesses in the pandemic containment measures put in place after government relaxation of the lockdown. These include the compulsory use of face masks in public spaces, social distancing and the use of hand-wash as well as hand sanitizers. As noted earlier, Nigeria experienced scarcity of surgical face masks, hand sanitizers, Vitamin C pills and other essential commodities after the outbreak of coronavirus. As noted earlier, this scarcity was partly caused by the embargo placed on their exportation by the United States and other foreign countries in a bid to conserve these resources for themselves.<sup>20</sup> Since these products were scarce and the demand for them high, a local market emerged for the sale of hand-sanitizers, hand-wash basins and for the fabrication of cloth face masks.

There is no gainsaying that these new opportunities were effectively exploited by informal workers. As admitted by a respondent (trader) in Agbowo Ibadan, the resumption of trade and the low demand for her current product compelled her to incorporate the sale of hand-wash basins and hand-sanitizers.<sup>21</sup> To maximize her profit, she enrolled her daughter to learn how to produce hand-sanitizers. The income from this new business line supplemented the family earnings after the relaxation of the lockdown. Equally, another respondent (trader) in Agbowo Ibadan noted that she had to consolidate her trade to prioritise goods that were in high demands or considered essentials in the pandemic economy. Thus, she concentrated on consumables like foodstuffs while diversifying into ice cream sales to cater for neighbourhood children of school age, who were largely at home due to school closure.<sup>22</sup> By the same token, articles like call cards, phone accessories, fabric materials, books and so on witnessed drastic reduction in patronage and traders of these products had to diversify or stop stocking them. The next section gives a detail account of how dressmakers respond to the precarity heralded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>20</sup>United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, "COVID-19 and Export Restriction: The Limits of International Law and Lessons for AfCFTA," *United Nations*, 19 May 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/coronavirus/COVID-19-and-export-restrictions-limits-international-trade-law-and-lessons-afcfta> [Accessed 12 December 2020]

<sup>21</sup>Interview with Female Trader 3, Agbowo Ibadan, 7 August 2020.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with Female Trader 2, Agbowo Ibadan, 7 August 2020.

# Fashion Designers/ Dressmakers' Response to COVID-19 Lockdown

There is no doubt that the imposition of COVID-19 lockdown and subsequent measures put to curtail it had grave repercussions on the fashion industry. The fashion industry in Ibadan, as elsewhere in southwest Nigeria is dominated by women who control the sale and sewing of fabric materials. In particular, this industry thrives on *Owanbe*, an urban Yoruba coinage that represents lively parties.<sup>23</sup> In most cases, *Owanbe* could be in the form of a cultural festival, weddings, burial festivals, naming ceremonies, chieftaincy coronation and so on. Aside from the assorted meals that usually accompany such parties, there is also the adornment of uniformed attire known as *AsoEbi* by friends and associates of the celebrants. Emanating from the culture of *Owanbe* is a political economy that caters for event planners, dressmakers, bakers, artistes, disk jockey, ushers, hoteliers, masters of ceremonies, clerics, cooks, among others. Consequent upon the restrictions placed on large social gatherings, *Owanbe* were temporarily suspended and the various jobs dependent on them became endangered.

Remarking on the impact of the COVID-19 social restriction on her tailoring business, a dressmaker remarked that there was, “no wedding, no birthday, no ceremony...one cannot see any fine designs and gele...they are not wearing anything new”.<sup>24</sup> Inferred from this remark is the heavy dependence of the dressmakers on outdoor social occasions as a prerequisite for the sustenance of their industry. Another dressmaker re-echoed this thought, that:

“There was none. Even the one I attended was low key and was not that flamboyant. We just had a few people from the groom and bride's family. And the wedding was done and over. So it was not a big party.”<sup>25</sup>

Admittedly, in the absence of large festive *owanbe* and the accompanying low demand for new clothes, dressmakers were rendered redundant and they, like

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<sup>23</sup>Adefolake Odunayo Orimolade, *Aso Ebi: Impact of the Social Uniform in Nigerian Caucuses, Yoruba Culture and Contemporary Trends* (Pretoria: Masters' of Visual Arts Dissertation, University of South Africa, 2014), 11-12.

<sup>24</sup>Interview with Female Dressmaker 1, Agbowo Ibadan, 18 July 2020.

<sup>25</sup>Interview with Male Dressmaker 3, Bodija Ibadan, 7 August 2020.

many small business owners took to consuming radio contents in a bid to while away time. With the relaxed COVID-19 social restriction, the dressmakers began to observe events around them in order to map new fashion trends. This observation revealed that the public was now going about their business with varying types of face masks in compliance with COVID-19 containment directives. This discovery presented a golden opportunity for the dressmakers who now began to fashion cloth face masks, that were modelled after the scarce surgical face mask.



**Figure 4: A face mask prototype modelled after the surgical face mask. Acquired in Agbowo Ibadan, April 2020. Source: Author.**

Since the daily wearing of face masks was never a quotidian dressing style of any Nigerian group, one is left to wonder how the local dressmakers easily began to fabricate the. The answer to this puzzle lies in “process invention.”<sup>26</sup> This was done through the use of locally accessible materials to produce a substitute for the face mask. It is likely that as entrepreneurs, the dressmakers saw an opportunity in the high demand for face masks and adapted their sewing skill to fashion a suitable alternative for the new market. Explaining how the skills for fabricating the face mask was developed, a dressmaker noted that:

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<sup>26</sup>Gloria Emeagwali, “Interconnections between Female Entrepreneurship and Technological Innovation in the Nigerian Context,” in *Entrepreneurship in Africa: A Historical Approach*, ed. Moses Ochonu (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018).

“Though it is not like one learnt this from a particular master, one can always draw inspiration from passers-by that wear different styles from the ones one has produced...It is the nature of our job. There is no one that can claim he learned it from one master. If you look at the mask on display, I have about three types. Some buyers would specifically request for the one with platen and some will order for another type. Later, I started lacing it with bayad. It is not like I have learnt it anywhere.”<sup>27</sup>

This opinion is corroborated by another dressmaker, who admitted that:

“When it got to a certain period, the government mandated the usage of mask cover. When this announcement was made, I also began to make face masks. As you rightly observed, there was a time when I had them displayed in front of my shop...You see when I started, I was just making them somehow and it was meaningless. I used some of them and some customers tried some out. I observed that it was difficult breathing. These are some of my earlier creations. As you can see, one cannot breathe well or talk when using them. This difficulty necessitated the need to make something that was breathable and I started experimenting again.”<sup>28</sup>

As noted by the dressmakers, keen observation events around them and constant experimentation contributed to the successful fabrication of the local face mask. On the other hand, young and inexperienced seamstress admitted to learning face mask production from watching instructional materials on Facebook and YouTube.<sup>29</sup> Either way, the constant experimentation on different fabric by dressmakers saw the emergence of numerous patterns of cloth face masks in Ibadan, as well as in other parts of Nigeria. Opportunist entrepreneurs whose businesses have been affected by COVID-19 also began to contract dressmakers to mass-produce face masks for a larger market. These masks are then taken to car parks, bus stops, and the gate of institutions where the wearing of face masks had attained the status of ticket for gaining entrance into their premises. In Ibadan, such institutions include the public market, universities, polytechnic, banks, telecommunication service providers, private offices, government

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<sup>27</sup>Interview with Female Dressmaker 2, Agbowo Ibadan, 18 July 2020.

<sup>28</sup>Interview with Male Dressmaker 3, Bodija Ibadan, 7 August 2020.

<sup>29</sup>Field Note Entry, 15 July 2020.

establishments, as well as modern eateries. In the course of their sales, the vendors also bring feedbacks that assisted the bulk face mask producers to improve their design. Though initially modelled after the surgical face mask, the local face mask began to evolve to factor in consumer need for style, reusability and comfort.



**Figure 5: A Banner by the Ibadan Foodstuff Sellers Association displaying COVID-19 Protocol in Bodija Market. 11 August 2020. Source: Author.**



**Figure 6: Face Mask Vendor in front of University of Ibadan. September, 2020. Source: Author.**

Moving on, it is interesting to note that the production of face masks and its general acceptance as a form of COVID-19 consciousness created a value chain between the dressmakers, marketers/vendors and consumers. It must be stressed that there are varying reasons why these individuals partook in the value chain. On the one hand are amateur tailors, apprentices and students who due to the

idleness occasioned as a result of the lockdown or school closure, took to face mask production as a means of making brisk profits. Others, however, resorted to the fabrication of face masks as a form of diversification to sustain their livelihood that had adversely suffered due to the pandemic. This group argued that the production of face masks was not necessarily a profitable business compared to regular dressmaking but one they still have to do to earn a living for their family. The respondents (dressmakers) lamented that:

It is the lack of job that pushes one into face mask production. Even with this, it is not so profitable when compared with the stress that goes into making it. One can barely make up to six (in a day). Then one has to subtract the cost of the fabric, elastic band and so on. So it is not so profitable. It is the lack of jobs that push me into this.<sup>30</sup>

Seriously! You know that with the Corona lockdown, nobody is going out and nobody is coming in (to buy goods). It is this thing (face mask production) that is giving us food. Without this, the first one and second week, we suffered. Because nobody wants to leave home...We come here (to work) but nobody tried to enter here. All of us were afraid that maybe the world wants to turn upside down.<sup>31</sup>

From the above, the economic vulnerability of the dressmakers is obvious. Though they were not content with the meagre economic reward they earn from their effort, they continued to work in the spirit of “half bread is better than none.” As mentioned earlier, the initial cost of producing the face mask was discouraging due to the different materials required to produce a face mask. These include but not limited fabric material, elastic band, bayad, cotton thread, among others. These required items affected the profitability of the face mask venture and prompted dressmakers to devise new ways of improving their profit margin. This includes the use of apprentice as face mask marketers;<sup>32</sup> through mass-production for third parties, thus allowing them to concentrate more on

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<sup>30</sup>Interview with Female Dressmaker 2, Agbowo Ibadan, 18 July 2020.

<sup>31</sup>Interview with Female Dressmaker 1, Agbowo Ibadan, 18 July 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Male Dressmaker 3, Bodija Ibadan, 7 August 2020.

production and not sales;<sup>33</sup> and subsequently through the use of elastic fabric materials that required no additional inputs like bayads or elastic bands.<sup>34</sup>

It should be added these measures benefitted from the increased demand for cloth face masks occasioned by the initial zealous enforcement of the COVID-19 protocol after the relaxation of social restriction in April 2020. In Bodija market for example, market traders were arrested and heavily fined by the state task force for not wearing a face mask.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the marketplace, like others in Ibadan, featured some of the constant violation of laid down COVID-19 protocols (Figure 7 & 8) during the study period. When asked why many were not wearing face masks, the market women attributed this to difficulty in breathing and the need to call at and negotiate with customers in order to maximize sales. These legitimate concerns rendered the market women vulnerable to state agents who could arrest them under the guise of enforcing the COVID-19 containment protocols. Consequently, the arrested persons were fined or subjected to other forms of extortion. With this in mind, many traders and customers had to embrace the use of face mask, thus creating a lucrative market for face mask producers and vendors.



**Figure 7: Bodija Market, 9 August 2020. Source: Author.**

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Female Dressmaker 1, Agbowo Ibadan, 18 July 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Female Dressmaker 2, Agbowo Ibadan, 18 July 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Trader 4, Bodija Ibadan, 25 July 2020.



Figure 8: Bodija Market, 9 August 2020. Source: Author.

## Transporters' Response to COVID-19 Lockdown

The enforcement of COVID-19 containment protocol had destabilising effects on transporters in the same way it affected the dressmakers. Clearly, the foremost hallmark of the lockdown was a restriction on mobility. Workers, with the exception of essential labour, were expected to stay/ work from home, thus drastically reducing the number of likely passengers in need of transport service. In addition to this, government enforced a mandatory reduction in the carrying capacity of all commercial transporters, and in turn the daily income of the drivers and riders. For instance, a typical Micra cab – the most popular means of transportation in Ibadan metropolis – usually carry five passengers per trip but now had to carry just three passengers. With a reduction in the number of passengers needing public transport, the odds of covering these losses through increased working hours was very daunting.

Regardless of the economic hardship created by this new loading policy, transport unions embraced the COVID-19 containment protocols by installing hand-wash in parks while road union bosses made customized face masks for their members. Whereas these measures ensured that the transporters were able to remain in business, this did not resolve the problem of low patronage and reduced income. Eventually, the income loss was temporarily covered through an increase of transport fare, thus transferring the loss to the customers (passengers). For instance, among the University of Ibadan transporters, transport fare increased from ₦30 to ₦50. In the same manner, Agbowo to Iwo

road was increased from ₦100 to ₦150 at the height of the pandemic.<sup>36</sup> Though some of the fares have reversed to their old rate, the University of Ibadan transporters continue to retain the new fare.

It is noteworthy that the state-wide enforcement of the COVID-19 containment protocols revealed the precarity of the livelihood of transporters and their vulnerability to state security agencies' exploitation. Even in the face of the pandemic, transporters were regularly extorted by security agencies under the guises of enforcing the COVID-19 protocol; thus affecting their meagre income. It is rather interesting that instead of breeding conflict, this exploitation increased their civic awareness. For some transporters, the face mask even assumed the status of a "spiritual totem"<sup>37</sup> that was conspicuously hung on the rear mirror for emergency use; should in case the driver is confronted by security men while not wearing one. Transporters interviewed in the course of this research admitted owning between two and four face masks and many of them even lend their passengers face masks in a bid to minimize confrontation with state security.

One unanswered question in all these is why transporters or any of the small businesses would continue to work even when they know the risk of getting infected in the process of transacting with strangers. Aside from the obvious need to make a living, transporters in particular run the risk of losing their means of livelihood if they were unable to meet their daily income target. Clearly, most of the transporters do not own the vehicle with which they work and have to make a daily or weekly payment to the original owner of the vehicle in order to retain operation. Some transporters admitted that they were compelled by these hire-purchase agreements to work in order to meet their contract obligation; lest they lose their vehicles to the original owners.<sup>38</sup> Notwithstanding, some transporters lost their operational vehicle due to their inability to meet up this agreement and had to resort to sport gambling to support themselves; while others depended on their political patrons for social protections and palliatives to help cushion the effect of the pandemic. Be that as it may, these two alternatives were not always reliable, those forcing transporters on hire-purchase agreement to renegotiate their contract or to move to a new employer.

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<sup>36</sup> Field Note Entry, 23 July 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Field Note Entry, 18 November 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Tricycle Rider 1, Bodija Ibadan, 12 August 2020.

At this point, it should be added that the Nigerian governments were not oblivious that COVID-19 induced poverty affecting the masses. Indeed, both state and federal government made provisions for food packages and economic stimulus for vulnerable persons within their jurisdiction. Through partnership with the private sector, the federal government was able to raise ₦27 billion in the war against COVID-19.<sup>39</sup> Equally important is the fact that part of these donations was invested to provide COVID-19 palliatives for vulnerable persons, although most of these goods eventually wound up with politicians and their acolytes.

This development, coupled with rising poverty and unemployment, fuelled a rise in crime rate. In all the areas covered by this study, respondents admitted a peak in crime rates, particularly armed robbery and burglary during the pandemic.<sup>40</sup> Rather than tackle this worrisome trend that was becoming rampant, the police busied itself with civilian extortion and the enforcement of the lockdown. It is on note that the enforcement of COVID-19 lockdown presented a lucrative avenue to state security officers for improved extortion. In enforcing the COVID-19 containment protocols, many checkpoints emerged and these became an avenue for civilian extortions.<sup>41</sup> Arguably, the lockdown also heralded an increased in the number of cyber-fraudsters,<sup>42</sup> who became easy targets for unscrupulous police officer. One police unit that was notorious for harassing and

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<sup>39</sup> Azeez Hanafi, "COVID-19 lockdown: How 'diversion' denied many poor, vulnerable persons govt's food," *The Punch*, 5 July 2020, Retrieved from <https://punchng.com/Covid-19-lockdown-how-diversion-denied-many-poor-vulnerable-persons-govts-food/> [Accessed 1 August 2021].

<sup>40</sup>This was not limited to Ibadan. In Lagos, traffic robbery became rampant as vulnerable persons and criminal elements sort alternative means of livelihood. See: Oluwatosin Omojuyigbe, "Starved by lockdown, Lagos traffic robbers return with hotter venom," *The Punch*, 12 June 2020, <https://punchng.com/starved-by-lockdown-lagos-traffic-robbers-return-with-hotter-venom/> [Accessed 1 August 2021].

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Njoku et al, "How police, military extort at COVID-19 checkpoints'," *The Guardian*, 7 April 2020, <https://guardian.ng/news/how-police-military-extort-at-Covid-19-checkpoints/> [Accessed 14 April 2020].

<sup>42</sup> Uche Igwe, "Nigeria's growing cybercrime threat needs urgent government action," *London School of Economics Blog*, 9 June 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/06/09/nigerias-growing-cybercrime-phishing-threat-needs-urgent-government-action-economy/> [Accessed 14 April 2020].

extorting perceived internet fraudsters was the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). In some of its extortionist exercises, SARS was accused of extrajudicial killings, thus proving the trigger for the social protest widely regarded as ENDSARS.<sup>43</sup> These protest lasted from October 8, 2020 to October 20, 2020.

The outbreak of ENDSARS and its aftermath can be located in the civil discontent that emerged due to the ineffective management of the tensions caused by COVID-19. Though the protest experienced large attendance from various social groupings, it was obvious that some of the attendants were youths whose livelihood was affected by the pandemic or police brutality.<sup>44</sup> More so, the provision of free food and other social amenities made the protest ground attractive to this group who had been rendered redundant by the pandemic. In addition to this benefit, the protest ground also became a lucrative venue for face mask vendors who thrived to these locations to sell their wares to the protesters. In Ibadan, the ENDSARS protest initially held at Iwo Road but subsequently moved to the State Secretariat at Agodi. This relocation was necessary in light of increasing confrontation between state security officials, political thugs<sup>45</sup> and the ENDSARS protesters.

Following repeated but failed attempts by government to put an end to the ENDSARS protests, the protest degenerated into general lawlessness, vandalism, robbery and arson due to exogenous and endogenous factors.<sup>46</sup> While providing

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<sup>43</sup> *Amnesty International*, “#ENDSARS Movement: From Twitter to Nigerian Streets,” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2021/02/nigeria-end-impunity-for-police-violence-by-sars-endsars/> [Accessed 1 August 2021].

<sup>44</sup> Wale Oyewale, “PHOTOS: #EndSARS protesters block Iwo road, Ibadan.” *The Punch*, 13 October 2020, <https://punchng.com/photos-endsars-protesters-block-iwo-road-ibadan/> [Accessed 1 August 2021].

<sup>45</sup> Shayera Dark, “#ENDSARS: How Nigerians harness social media against police abuse,” *Al Jazeera*, 25 October 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/25/endsars-how-nigerians-use-social-media-against-police-brutality> [Accessed 1 August 2021].

<sup>46</sup> The Nigerian government initially conceded to the 5 demands of the #Endsars protesters and entered negotiation with leading celebrities and social influencers to broker peace with the protesters, the protests persisted and it was alleged that state agents and hoodlums were deployed to abruptly terminate the protest. See: Dark, “#ENDSARS: How Nigerians harness social media against police abuse,.”

explanation behind the collapse of the ENDSARS protest is beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting that in places like Lagos, some protesters were said to have lost their lives in the ensuing melee. On the other hand, suspected protesters stormed perceived warehouses where COVID-19 palliatives were stored and carted away these resources.<sup>47</sup> What this goes to underscore is the economic undertone that may have prompted the ENDSARS protests in the first place.

## **Retail Traders' Response to COVID-19 Lockdown**

One of the most controversial topics during the pronouncement of COVID-19 pandemic was the question of what to do with the market. Since the government itself was unable to propose alternative means for buyers to access goods and articles, the issue of closing the markets died a stillbirth. However, market traders still had to contend with the outdoor apathy displayed by the public, even after the relaxation of the lockdown. Worse affected were consumable traders that had built their business around student patronage. These traders were affected by the sudden shutdown of the schools and had to devise alternative marketing strategies to sell their wares. At the Bodija markets, traders responded by harvesting the labour of their children and dependents, who had returned home due to the lockdown, into their businesses.<sup>48</sup> These new hands assisted in wooing customers and in the loading, as well as unloading of trade articles. In particular, retail traders that majored in foodstuffs and other consumables were able to continue business without making drastic changes to their trade items. This, however, cannot be said for some other businesses.

Mainly due to low patronage, some small business owners had to divest into highly demanded commodities during the study period. For example, some

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<sup>47</sup> Olugbenga Adani, "Why angry Nigerians help themselves with food items kept in discreet warehouses," *International Centre for Investigative Reporting*, 28 October 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.icirnigeria.org/a-realistic-perspective-to-the-looting-of-food-warehouses/> [Accessed 17 January 2021].

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Trader 4, Bodija Ibadan, 25 July 2020.

phone gadgets dealers and recharge card sellers had to start selling hand-sanitizers, face masks and internet data subscriptions. Over time, the face mask became the prime trade that many retail traders divested into or included in their trade articles. It is interesting to note that the sale of face masks affected the modus operandi of some of these retail traders as this trade required locating the wares in strategic places where the demand is high. Foremost among these are the gates of major banks, schools, parks, cinemas, higher educational institutions and modern eateries, where instructions were given to prevent those not wearing face masks from entering their premises. During the strict enforcement of the COVID-19 Lockdown, these became the strategic hotspots for the sales of face masks, although their profitability varies and fluctuates throughout the pandemic. In the same manner, it was observed that the inability of any institution to enforce such COVID-19 containment protocols often resulted in the desertion of such premises by face masks vendors. This approach ensured that the face mask traders were able to prioritize locations where sales could be maximised.

Worthy of additions is the fact that face mask vendors go to work every day including on Sundays. This is understandable as many of them were students affected by school lockdown, young or old traders whose businesses were affected by the pandemic and opportunity entrepreneurs. To maximise sales, vendors supply both fabricated face masks and surgical face masks. Another strategy used by face mask vendors was to specifically target visitors without face masks with an advert that goes thus: *"Face mask! Face Mask!! You will not be allowed to enter if you don't wear face mask!"*<sup>49</sup> This marketing strategy, which also doubles as a means of public sensitization, convinced many visitors without masks to patronize the mask vendors. For this reason, the face masks vendors share the credit for popularising the public adherence to the use of face masks in some parts of Ibadan.

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<sup>49</sup>Field Note Entry, 18 November 2020.



**Figure 9: Students of Olive International School, BodijaIbadan, wearing a customized face mask, Ibadan. April 2021. Source: Mr. Olawale Ogundipe.**



**Figure 10: COVID-19 Banner at The Polytechnic Ibadan main gate. 30 September 2020. Source: Author.**



**Figure 11: A masked buyer at Agbowo Junction, May 2020. Source: Author.**

Beginning from May 25, the Oyo State government began to relax the partial lockdown and this contributed to the increased adoption of face masks. In fact, the government itself and allied bodies produced some masks and fashion designers recorded more sales. Therefore, business began to gradually improve for the small businesses too. New patterns or styles emerged to compete for the attention of buyers. Interestingly, there also emerged some new masks, made of lace products or materials that offered little or no protection for the face mask users, but which are no less in circulation.<sup>50</sup> Apparently, the lack of regulation and the need to cater for both the health and fashion concerns of the mask consumers may have prompted this development. Another explanation adduced for this is the poor understanding of the nature of COVID-19 by the fashion designers and the protective function that their mask must served to the consumer. This trend was halted by the dwindling demand for face mask from the middle of July. A

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<sup>50</sup>Field Note Entry, 23 July 2020.

number of factors can be attributed to the reduced demand for fabricated face mask.

Firstly, there is a high likelihood that the consumers had procured a significant number of masks (usually 2-4) and were no longer in demand of new masks, unless in times of emergency. Secondly, the local production of affordable clinical mask<sup>51</sup> had begun to appreciate by this time and many resorted to this option for its elitist or exotic taste and breathable import. Lastly and also more controversial is the indifferent attitude of the people to the COVID-19 guideline and the weak enforcement of face mask usage in public space by state security agents. These notwithstanding, the “ticket status”<sup>52</sup> that the face mask had acquired in certain institutions and the various fashion ideas it inspired ensured that the production of cloth face masks would persist into the New Year (Figure 12 & 13). Perhaps the stocking of cloth-based face mask by Internet Malls like Jumia and Corazon Marketplace, including physical malls like Shokem are testaments that the face mask may persist as an important fashion accoutrement in the foreseeable future.



**Figure 12: Ada Afolowuwake Ogunkeye (Folu Storms) and Kate Henshaw in trendy face mask<sup>53</sup>.**

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<sup>51</sup> “How Lagos Startup Pioneered Medical Face Mask Enterprise,” *Daily Trust*, 17 August 2020, Retrieved from: <https://dailytrust.com/how-lagos-startup-pioneered-medical-face-mask-enterprise> [Accessed 3 October 2020]

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Dressmaker 5, Agbowo Ibadan, 7 August 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51899526> & <https://twitter.com/henshawkate/status/1381874960063463425> [Accessed 12 December 2020].



Figure 13: Czar and Czarina Models with COVID-Inspired Dress<sup>54</sup>.

## Conclusion

In light of the controversial management of the palliatives and economic stimulus packages meant to curtail the impact of COVID-19 in Nigeria, small business had to fashion new ways of survival in order to eke a living during the onset of the pandemic. In Ibadan, southwest Nigeria, it is apparent that the sudden closure of tertiary educational institutions and the resultant state government adoption of a partial lockdown threw many small businesses into borderline poverty. Though not located in a rural area, the opinion expressed by BaliqeesSalaudeen about college dependent businesses is applicable to the small ventures within the study area:

“...Nigerian universities are built in rural, or developing communities with the hope that the area progresses as the school advances...Business owners relocate their enterprise or open a

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<sup>54</sup> Source: [https://twitter.com/Czar\\_Czarina/status/1289201422655827969/photo/2](https://twitter.com/Czar_Czarina/status/1289201422655827969/photo/2) & [https://twitter.com/Czar\\_Czarina/status/1289204447755661314/photo/1](https://twitter.com/Czar_Czarina/status/1289204447755661314/photo/1) [Accessed 12 December 2020].

branch in these growing communities. So when a strike happens, their sales become entirely crippled.”<sup>55</sup>

With the double tragedy of school closure orchestrated by the COVID-19 lockdown; and the difficulty to access palliatives, small businesses realised they cannot rely on the government and had to devise new means of survival or risk losing their capital. Capitalising on the opportunities availed by the same pandemic economic, this study shows how affected small businesses have been able to weather the storm – even without a government economic stimulus package. In this study, the face mask which has become emblematic of the pandemic economy was used to map the interconnection between the economic fate of dressmakers, traders, transporters and their customers. It should be added that the inability of the Nigerian government to devise a comprehensive social protection for its vulnerable masses raised civil discontent and contributed to the outbreak of the #ENDSARS Protest that rocked the nation in October 2020.<sup>56</sup> Not long after, the protest resulted in mass looting of palliative warehouses and private properties. It is possible that such development would have been averted or mitigated if the government had taken the UNDP’s recommendation of adopting a pro-poor economic policy during the pandemic.

To conclude, though the above examined small businesses were affected and likewise exploited the opportunities created by the pandemic, there is no doubt that they also contributed in many ways to the eased resumption of the economy after the COVID-19 disruption. Though most of the respondents were oblivious or humble in regard to their contribution to containing the pandemic, their ingenuity and brisk response to the challenges raised by COVID-19 increased general consciousness of the virus while also contributing to the low rate of infection incidences in Ibadan. It is rather instructive that industrial surgical mask producers have also taken a cue from local face mask producers by producing different colours of face mask to tend to the health and fashion concern of the market. Indeed, the pre-COVID-19 face mask prototype color was largely sky blue but now there are pink, green, orange, yellow and black face

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<sup>55</sup>Fidelis Mbah, “Nigeria announces Lockdown of Major Cities to Curb Coronavirus,” *AlJazeera*, 30 March 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/3/30/nigeria-announces-lockdown-of-major-cities-to-curb-coronavirus> [Accessed 14 April 2020].

<sup>56</sup>Olugbenga Adani, “Why angry Nigerians help themselves with food items kept in discreet warehouses,” *International Centre for Investigative Reporting*, 28 October 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.icirnigeria.org/a-realistic-perspective-to-the-looting-of-food-warehouses/> [Accessed 17 January 2021].

masks in circulation. What this goes to show is that the face as we know it - and even the economy at large – would continue to contend with the legacy of COVID-19 in the near future.

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