The scale **Journal Website:** https://thescalejournal.com.ng/
An Interdisciplinary Journal of
The ACADEMIC STAFF UNION OF POLYTECHNICS - ZONE D
ISSN: 2992-3727 Published 30th November, 2025

GOVERNANCE BY PALLIATIVES AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA UNDER PRESIDENT BUHARI ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract
Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has faced a myriad of challenges over the years, including economic downturns, security concerns and public health crises. In response, the government has often turned to palliatives as a temporary measure to alleviate the immediate suffering of its citizens. The administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015 – 2023) witnessed an intensification of palliative – based governance as a response to the country's multifaceted socio- economic challenges. Faced with recession, inflation, unemployment, insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic, the government increasingly adopted short-term relief measures such as cash transfers, food aid, the TraderMoni scheme, anchor borrower incentives, school feeding programmes and post pandemic distribution efforts. While these interventions temporarily cushioned hardship, critics argue that they were insufficient to address deep structural constraints affecting national development. Anchored on the theory of Political Business Cycle and Clientlism, this paper interrogates the nature, drivers and implications of governance by palliatives under Buhari's administration. Using a qualitative, descriptive and documentary method, the paper argues that the Buhari administration institutionalized palliative-driven governance manifested in social investment programmes, conditional cash transfers, food distributions and pandemic related handouts as substitutes for structural reforms. While framed as poverty reduction schemes, these interventions often served electoral, political and clientelistic functions, thereby weakening long – term development planning. The paper concludes that although palliatives have humanitarian value, their institutionalization undermines sustainable development, weakens institutions, entrenches political patronage and perpetuates a cycle of dependency. The paper recommends stronger social protection systems, economic diversification, institutional reforms and long-term development planning.
Keywords: Governance, Palliatives, National Development, Dependency, Development Planning.

INTRODUCTION

Governance in contemporary Nigeria has increasingly been characterized by the deployment of palliative measures as a central response to socio – economic challenges. This pattern became especially pronounced under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration (2015 - 2023). The period witnessed two economic recessions (2016 and 2020), rising inflation, unemployment, escalating poverty levels and unprecedented insecurity. These challenges strained state capacity and prompted an increasing reliance on palliative measures temporary relief interventions designed to cushion citizens from hardship (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Rather than implementing deep structural reforms capable of stimulating long-term development, the government frequently adopted short-term relief interventions such as conditional cash transfers, food distributions, Tradermoni schemes, school feeding programmes, N–Power schemes and COVID – 19 emergency palliatives.

While palliatives may provide immediate relief to vulnerable populations, sustained reliance on them raises critical questions about their implications for national development. Scholars like Grindle (2007), Ojewale (2023) and Amah (2018) have argued that governance by palliatives often emerges where institutional weakness, limited state capacity or political expediency hinder the formulation and execution of long-term development plans. Under Buhari's administration, these measures were

presented as components of a broader social protection strategy; however, critics contend that they masked deeper governance and structural problems such as rising poverty, inadequate infrastructure, limited industrialization and persistent unemployment (Amadi & Ekekwe, 2014).
Given Nigeria's complex development landscape the Buhari era offers a compelling case study for examining how palliative – based governance intersects with national development. This paper explores the evolution, rationale and outcomes of governance by palliatives during this period. It interrogates the nature of palliative interventions, their political economy and their long – term implications for economic, social and institutional development in Nigeria.

By situating the analysis within established theoretical perspectives such as political Business Cycle and Clientelism – the paper provides a robust scholarly understanding of the limitations of palliatives governance in achieving transformative national development.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

i. **Governance:** Governance refers to the processes, systems and institutions through which public authority is exercised to manage a state's resources and concerns (World Bank, 1992). It is the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented). Its focus is basically on how power is exercised. Good governance requires effectiveness, transparency, accountability and responsiveness (UNDP, 2010).

ii. **Palliatives:** Generally, palliatives refer to temporary measures deployed to mitigate a unfavourable or deteriorating condition. The concept is multifaceted in nature and enjoys broad application across different contexts of crisis and disruption. Within the context of this paper, it describes temporary measures designed to offer immediate relief and support to individuals and communities facing economic challenges (Mohammed; Bukar & Kawi, 2025). They include food aid, cash transfers, subsidies, social services and relief materials designed for short-term effect (Amah, 2018).

iii. **Governance by Palliatives:** Governance by palliatives describes a pattern in which governments rely heavily on relief interventions instead of implementing structural reforms. It can also be seen as a mode of governance in which the state predominantly employs short –term, distributive and reactive policy measures to manage societal grievances and maintain political stability, while systematically neglecting, deferring or paying lip service to the long term structural reforms necessary for sustainable development. Stokes (2005) argues that the approach is often associated with political clientelism and weak institutional capacity. The core proposition of governance by palliatives is that it represents a political strategy of substitution. It substitutes the difficult task of state – building and institutional reform with the simpler, more politically lucrative task of resource distribution. It is a form of crisis management that by design, ensures the recurrence of the crises it manages.

iv. **National Development**: National development is a holistic and multidimensional process aimed at fundamentally improving the economic, social, political and cultural wellbeing of all citizens within a state (Todaro & Smiths 2015). It transcends mere economic growth to encompass a transformative journey towards a more equitable, prosperous and sovereign society. It involves improving infrastructure social welfare and living standards through coordinated strategies and the full participation of its people.

In Nigeria, national development is guided by strategic plans like the current National Development Plan (NDP) 2021 – 2025, which focuses on economic growth, infrastructure and social welfare, but faces challenges like corruption, insecurity and poor implementation of previous plans. There is a critical nexus between governance and national development. Governance is the means and national development is the end. The nature of governance has direct impact on development outcomes.

National development is not a final destination but a continuous process of societal improvement. It is a complex non linear journey that requires strategic vision, consistent leadership and effective institutions. It involves tough choices, particularly between immediate consumption (the realm of palliatives) and long – term investment (the realm of development). A state that fails to clearly make this distinction, resorting to governance by palliatives may achieve temporary stability but will inevitably forfeit sustainable prosperity, human dignity and a resilient future.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze governance by palliatives and its implications for national development in Nigeria under President Buhari's administration, this paper adopts a dual theory framework comprising the Political Business Cycle theory and Clientelism theory. Both theories complement each other in explaining both the political timing and the distributive logic behind palliative – driven governance.

- **Political Business Cycle Theory**

The Political Business Cycle theory, which was introduced by Nordhaus (1975), argues that elected officials strategically manipulate economic policies to gain electoral advantage. Politicians tend to implement expansionary policies such as subsidies, cash transfers, welfare packages and palliatives before elections to influence public perception and secure political support.

The Political Business Cycle theory assumes that:

i. Politicians seek political advantages or re – election and manipulate socio – economic conditions to attain it (Northaus, 1975).
ii. Voters are myopic, often responding more to current welfare conditions than long-term benefits (Alesina, 1987)
iii. Governments influence economic indicators through fiscal and welfare policies, especially during election periods (Rogoff, 1990).
iv. Election cycles produce policy cycles, leading to high spending before elections and low spending after elections (Akhmedov & Zhuravskaya, 2004).

Under Buhari's administration, the deployment of palliative measures such as tradermoni, marketmoni and conditional cash transfers increased noticeably before the 2019 general elections. These short-term interventions aligned with political times lines rather than long-term development plans. The timing and visibility of these interventions mirror the strategic patterns predicted by the theory. Thus, the political business cycle theory helps explain why palliatives intensify during politically sensitive periods and how they serve electoral motives than structural development.

Clientelism Theory

- Clientelism refers to the exchange of goods, services or benefits for political loyalty, support or votes. The theory emphasizes dyadic, hierarchical and reciprocal relationships between political patrons (leaders) and clients (citizens) (Lemarchand & Legg, 1972; Kitschett & Wilkinson, 2007). Clientelism is prevalent in developing democracies where institutions are weak and political competition relies heavily on material inducements rather than policy performance. Clientelism is anchored on the principles that:

i. Material goods or favours are exchanged for political support (Stokes, 2005).
ii. Patrons (politicians) distribute selective benefits such as cash, food, jobs and subsidies to targeted groups.
iii. Clients (citizens or groups) reciprocate with votes, loyalty or mobilization.
iv. The distribution is particularistic and not universal. Benefits go to only politically useful segments.
v. Clientelism thrives where poverty is high and citizens depend on political actors for basic welfare.

Palliatives are often distributed through political networks, religious, party structures and local intermediaries. This method of distribution mirrors clientelistic relationships where the ruling elites provide short term benefits in exchange for loyalty or electoral support. During the Buhari administration:

i. TraderMoni and Marketmoni were distributed through party and politically aligned structures, targeting market women and artisans – groups with high electoral mobilization potential.
ii. COVID – 19 palliatives were distributed through elected and appointed politicians as well as local networks, with complaints of bias and exclusion.
iii. Conditional cash transfers were channeled through local party – linked coordinators in the states and local governments. Thus, clientelism theory explains how palliatives were distributed and why they reinforced patron – client networks instead of fostering inclusive development.

Applied together, the theory of political business cycle and clientelism theory creates a powerful explanatory framework. While the political business cycle theory explains the timing, the clientelism theory explains the nature of distribution. Together, they show:

i. Why palliatives dominate Nigerian governance
ii. Why they fail to promote national development. They emphasize political and electoral benefits over structural economic transformation
iii. Why palliatives perpetuate dependence. It makes citizens to increasingly rely on political actors rather than on institutions of the state or productive systems.
iv. Why governance remains reactive. Rather than long term development planning political leaders' resort to short term politically motivated interventions.

Thus, the dual – framework approach provides a comprehensive understanding of governance by palliatives as both an electoral strategy and a clientelisitc tool with profound implications for national development.

GOVERNANCE BY PALLIATIVES UNDER PRESIDENT BUHARI

The administration of President Muhammadu Buhari came into office on 29th May, 2015. The administration experienced significant socio – economic challenges which include:

i. Economic recession (2016 and 2020)
ii. Rising inflation and food insecurity
iii. High unemployment and underemployment
iv. Declining oil revenues
v. COVID-19 pandemic shocks
vi. Removal and adjustment of fuel subsidies

These conditions provided the context within which palliatives became central governance instruments. The Buhari administration's approach to palliative governance was characterized by an unprecedented scale of distribution, a diverse array of delivery mechanisms and their positioning within the governments social policy framework. The key palliative schemes undertaken by the administration include the:

i. **National Social Investment Programme (NSIP**). The programme which was launched in 2006 had four key components: N – Power programme for youth employment, the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) providing Microcredit, the National Home – Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) and the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programme for poor and vulnerable households. These programmes gulped an annual budgetary allocation of approximately 500 billion.

These GEEP component included several sub programmes that became symbolic of the administration's palliative approach:

- **TraderMoni**: Collateral free loans of ₦10,000 to petty traders, with potential for higher loans upon repayment
- **MarketMoni**: Interest free loans to market women and artisans ranging from 10,000 to 100,000
- **FarmerMoni:** Agricultural loans ranging from 300,000 to 2,000,000 for small holder farmers.

ii. ii. **COVID-19 Palliatives:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, the administration established a COVID-19 Crisis intervention. Fund as part of the Nigeria Economic Sustainability Plan (NESP). The COVID-19 palliatives included the distribution of 70,000 metric tons of food grains, expansion of the National Social Register by one million households and the implementation of a modified school feeding programme that delivered dry food rations to households.

iii. **Fuel Subsidy Removal and Economic Shocks**. In the wake of the reduction of fuel subsidy and the attendant economic effect on the citizens, the government responded with promise of increase in minimum wage, introduction of Compressed Natural Gas CNG and roll out of CNG powered mass transit buses.

On a general note, the implementation of these palliative programmes revealed consistent patterns that undermined their effectiveness and exposed their political nature. First, the process for identifying the most vulnerable beneficiaries was unclear and politically manipulated. A study of COVID – 19 palliatives found that citizens allege that the process of distribution of palliatives had been politicized, with resources often diverted to political loyalists rather than those with genuine needs.

Second, the timing of distribution frequently correlated with electoral cycles rather than objective need indicators. Major announcements of palliative expansions and disbursements often preceded elections, suggesting their deployment as voter persuasion tools. For instance, the massive expansion of the TraderMoni programme in 2018 – 2019 coincided with the election cycle, leading to allegations of vote buying.

Third, the monitoring and evaluation framework for these programmes was weak, with limited transparency regarding beneficiary selection, disbursement amounts and programme impacts. The implementation challenges of these programmes were not merely technical failures but reflected deeper political economy dynamics. As observed, these palliatives were more of political tools of control and legitimacy and not effective poverty tools. This fundamental disconnect between stated objectives and actual implementation patterns reveals the underlying political logic of palliative governance under the Buhari administration.

IMPLICATIONS OF GOVERNANCE BY PALLIATIVES ON NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The continuous and systemic resort to palliatives inflicts deep and lasting damage on a state's developmental prospects. The consequences include:

i. **Erosion of State Capacity and Institutional Decay:** By consistently resorting to the use of palliatives rather than the complex task of building state institutions for effective policy making and implementation, the bureaucracy becomes weakened. This creates a vicious cycle: weak institutions make palliatives the major option, which in turn further weakens the institutions

ii. **Fiscal Mismanagement and Macroeconomic Instability** Palliatives are often fiscally irresponsible. They are typically funded from windfall revenues or borrowing rather than from sustainable taxation. This leads to budget volatility, rising public debt and inflation. Funds that could have been invested in capital projects are diverted to recurrent consumption, starving the economy of the investments needed for future growth.

iii. **Perpetuation of Dependency and the Erosion of Citizenship:** Palliatives fosters a patron – client relationship between the state and the citizens. The citizens are positioned as passive recipients of state benevolence rather than as active agents of development and rights – bearing individuals. This undermines the social contract and dis-incentivises productive enterprise. This culture of dependency encourages laziness and retards the entrepreneurial spirit required for development.

iv. **Deepening of Inequality and Social Fragmentation**: Palliative distribution is often skewed by political, ethnic and regional considerations. This can compound existing social cleavages, fueling resentment between groups that are favoured and those that are not. Again, because palliatives are often hijacked by elites and middlemen, they can end up reinforcing the very inequalities they are supposed to alleviate.

v. **Stifling of Public Disclosure and Accountability:** Palliatives trivializes public policy debates. It allows underperforming governments to change the narrative from their failure to deliver development to their generosity in providing relief, thereby evading accountability. The administration of President Buhari relied on palliatives for image management during economic crisis.

vi. **Short-Term Relief Without Structural Transformation**. While palliatives alleviated immediate suffering, they did not translate into increased productivity, industrial expansion or infrastructural development.

vii. **Distortion of Democratic Competition**. Palliatives serve political purposes of the ruling elite rather than alleviating socio-economic challenges. Electoral manipulation through palliatives weakened democratic competitiveness. This inevitably results to the emergence of leaders who are ill equipped to address the development challenges of the state.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Governance by palliatives under Buhari's administration represented a political strategy shaped by electoral calculations and clientelistic incentives. While palliatives provided temporary relief, they did notcontribute meaningfully to sustainable national development. Instead, they entrenched dependency, weakened institutions, distorted democratic accountability and undermined coherent nation building efforts. A shift toward structural reforms, transparent and effective institutions, sustainable social protection systems and long – term development planning is needed urgently.

Transitioning from palliative governance to development governance requires fundamental reorientation of social policy approaches. To this end, the paper recommends that:

i. Nigeria should develop institutionalized social protection systems based on clear transparent eligibility criteria and depoliticized mechanisms. Such systems should be framed as citizens entitlements rather than political favours, strengthening rather than weakening the social contract.

ii. Social policy must be integrated with broader development planning, focusing on structural transformation rather than symptomatic relief. Investments in infrastructure, education, health care and productive sectors would reduce vulnerability more effectively than distributive palliatives.

iii. Accountability mechanisms must be strengthened to ensure transparency in resource allocation and programmes implementation. Regular rigorous impact evaluation would

ISSN: 2992-3727 Published 30th November, 2025

help prevent the politicization and corruption that undermined effectiveness of social programmes.

iv. Government should prioritize economic productivity and job creation over consumption support. Our economic reforms must be aimed at boosting productivity and self reliance. They must target employment and wealth creation, highlight the need for a fundamental shift from distribution to production.

v. Emphasis should be placed on economic diversification toward manufacturing, agriculture and knowledge sectors.

vi. Voter education should be enhanced as this would reduce electoral susceptibility to short – term distribute incentives

vii. Structural reforms in public institutions should be pursed. This will improve long term development outcomes

As Nigerian continues to grapple with under development challenges, the lessons from the Buhari's administrations palliative governance offer cautionary insights on the limitations of distributive approaches unmoored from clear development strategy. Ultimately, sustainable national development requires moving beyond governance by palliatives toward a development state capable of structural transformation and inclusive growth.

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