

COVID-19 and government interventions in the hospitality industry in Igbo land: A pilot report

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Abstract

COVID-19 affected the hospitality sector negatively, with 75 million jobs being at risk then, globally. Hotels in Nigeria reduced staff strength and salaries, suffered limited/zero patronage, and in some cases, closed down completely; hence, making government's intervention inevitable. This study is aimed at investigating government interventions in the hospitality industry in Igboland during COVID-19, with the following objectives: (i) to document government interventions in the hospitality industry during COVID-19, (ii) to itemize the benefits of government interventions in the sector during the pandemic, and (iii) to record the implication of government interventions in the hospitality industry and forecast future implications. The study employed the qualitative method using thematic analysis based on pragmatic and constructivist paradigms. The findings revealed government interventions in the use of facemasks, social distancing, and the provision of financial aid. However, there were limited or no information on financial assistance to hotels. While sit-at-home restriction was effective in curtailing the spread of the COVID-19 virus, hotels recorded economic losses as a result, and in extreme cases, shut down after the pandemic. Consequently, the need to establish bail-out/emergency funds for the hospitality industry is inevitable and imperative. This study is significant to hospitality stakeholders within and outside the study area, and a contribution to COVID-19 discourse.

Keywords: Anambra, COVID-19, Government, hospitality & intervention.

Introduction

The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) listed that tourism contributed 8.5% (\$194.2 billion) of global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018 (Senbeto et al., 2020); while in the year 2023, the overall contribution of the sector to the global GDP was about 9.9 trillion U.S dollars (Statista Research Department, 2024). The industry has been of immense value to developing nations across the globe, especially Nigeria, where it was reported to have attracted millions of dollars, leading to a higher gross domestic product (Ekwujuru, 2017), and generating jobs for skilled and unskilled workers.

The economic value of the hospitality industry was put to a halt with the arrival of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the latter part of 2019; which became a global phenomenon as of the year 2020, and later declared a pandemic on 11th March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). The hospitality sector is susceptible to external factors such as pandemics, and a pandemic disease is among the major factors that can affect the industry (Jin et al., 2019). Sadly, COVID-19 had a very disastrous economic impact across the globe, with

high margins of negative records in the hospitality sector. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) explained that the tourism and hospitality industry was among, if not the hardest hit by the pandemic, for instance, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2020) highlighted that 75 million jobs were at risk globally, with a million jobs seemingly on the line daily (Salem et al., 2022). -The pandemic halted international tourism, while domestic tourism stopped due to the lockdown conditions created in many countries (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2020) as a result of COVID-19. Many Nations, including Nigeria, shut down cities and states to control the spread of the deadly virus; hotels recorded a decline in patronage due to "stay-at-home policy" and "social distancing" (Chukwu, 2020).

Within Nigeria, cases of outright retrenchment of staff, reduction in salaries, working from home, and closure of some hotels due to little or zero patronage were reported. Bello and Bello (2021) made the following observations, "The dire state of financial capabilities of major hotels listed on the Nigeria stock exchange, for instance, has forced them

to consider massive job cuts, and cost reduction measures in a bid to survive. At the inception of the pandemic, these four major hotels maintained a 100% salary payment to over 900 employees in March and April 2020. As of the end of November 2020, their workforce headcount had reduced by more than 60%" (p.424); meanwhile, the governments of different countries tried to assist the hospitality and tourism industry in their respective countries, such as: Estonia, Portugal, Lithuania (Beqiri & Ademi, 2023), Nigeria (Ogundeji, et al., 2020) among others.

Given this scenario, it is necessary to examine government efforts in assisting the hospitality industry during the pandemic, because, it is expected that governments (international, national & local) should support and intervene in the tourism sector in cases of crisis of any type because they have the power to assist the industry during and after challenges (e.g., COVID-19) of any sort (Hoang et al., 2021; Sigala 2020). Financial assistance to the private sector in times of uncertainties, natural disasters, pandemic, among others, would probably provide a positive view of the government in support of businesses, and this would

likely attract potential investors. Moreover, some scholars believe that government subsidies and economic supports are appropriate actions and activities that generate externalities (Beqiri & Ademi, 2023), of which the tourism and hospitality sector is no exception. There are litanies of literature on the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism and hospitality sector, with records of high economic impact across different continents (Yang et al., 2020; Foo et al., 2020). So, the topic has attracted a lot of scholarship from different parts of the world, with interest in different areas and scopes.

However, there are limited studies on interventions from the public or private institutions towards the tourism and hospitality industry during COVID-19, especially in Nigeria; and there is a need for more studies in this regard (Del Chiappa et al., 2021). While the effects of the novel COVID-19 virus on the sector have been studied from different academic backgrounds, other issues relating to how the government controlled and managed the pandemic in the sector, and how stakeholders understand government interventions still appear scarce in the literature (Allaberganov et al. 2021; Yang et al.,

2021). Therefore, there is a need to understand government roles and interventions during the pandemic from stakeholders such as government ministries and hotel workers. The current investigation focuses on hotels in Awka, Anambra State. This is because, "Anambra State has one of the fastest growing hospitality industries in Nigeria" (Nwangene, et al., 2019, p. 255).

The study aims at investigating government interventions in the hospitality industry in Igboland during COVID-19 pandemic as a pilot report, using Awka in Anambra State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study pursues the following objectives: (i) to document government interventions in the hospitality sector during COVID-19; (ii) to itemize the benefits of government interventions in the hospitality sector during COVID-19; (iii) to record the implication of government interventions in the hospitality industry and forecast future implications.

Research methods

The study adopted the qualitative approach, using mainly interviews for data collection. The interview participants were selected from the staff of the hospitality department of the

Anambra State Ministry of Culture, Entertainment and Tourism (ASM CET), (note that the name of this ministry is subject to change, a new government can reassign or change the portfolios and nomenclature of the ministry. For instance, before the present administration that started in March, 2022, it was called, Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, Culture and Tourism). Also, managers and supervisors were selected from sampled hotels in Awka metropolis, Anambra State. Awka, the capital of Anambra State was selected because it attracts different classes of visitors on a daily basis in its tourism and hotel sector, and it is "one of the economic hubs of the state where economic and business activities take place. The state has hotels of different classes scattered all over the city" (Nwangene et al., 2019:257).

A total of twenty-eight (N=28, where N stands for number) respondents were purposefully selected for this study. Participants from ASM CET comprised the director of the hospitality department (N=1), one senior staff (N=1), and 15 other members of staff chosen by recommendation; these have spent over ten years in the ministry (N=15). The participants from sampled hotels in Awka metropolis comprised hotel managers

(N=4) and supervisors (N=7) who had been in the hospitality sector before COVID-19. Members of Staff of ASMCET were selected because the responsibility of regulating the hospitality industry falls within their operations in Anambra State; hence, it is ideal to seek their opinions for a balanced result and broader perspective.

Eight (8) hotels were visited for this study because of the timing of the study in 2024. Some hotel managers felt that it was late or not necessary to discuss COVID-19 anymore. Also, the lack of interest in the topic of COVID-19 by potential respondents also constituted a limitation to the choice of hotels selected. Further, some respondents agreed to discuss with the researcher only on the condition of anonymity with regard to their establishments. This is because, for the respondents to freely grant interview to the researcher, there is a need to get ethical clearance from the hotel owners which, as noticed by the researcher might take longer time than necessary. Moreover, hotel managements seem to be weary of researchers, whom they perceive as agents of business rivals or government officials scouting for information. This fear may be normal due to the large concentration of hotels in

Awka. The respondents from the following hotels however, agreed to reveal the names of their establishments: GeoGold Hotel and Haavila Suite. Furthermore, it is adjudged best to use purposive sampling to eliminate some bias as stated above. In a related study on the hospitality industry in Awka, Anambra State, the purposive sampling was used due to the issue of bias (Nwangene, et al., 2019).

The interviews were conducted up to three times with different participants. Different schedules were made for hotel managers and staff members of ASMCET which made it easy for all the participants to be available on their scheduled dates. All interview sessions with each participant lasted for less than an hour, as the objectives were straightforward and unambiguous. The questions were structured with the objectives of the study.

However, there were cases in which some participants were called over the telephone for clarifications during the sorting of data. Secondary data were equally used, especially from journal publications, online posts, and publications by international, national and local agencies on COVID-19 as well

as other relevant publications central to the aim of the study.

Thematic analysis was used to make meaning out of the data set, because, it is usually a common means of discussing and interpreting data in qualitative research, due to its ability to give precise description(s) and meaning in terms of themes and evolving patterns from any given data (Majumdar, 2019). The data were sorted after all the interviews, with similar ideas placed together to create themes for easy discussion.

Further, the study is woven and discussed from a pragmatic perspective, to find solution(s) to the issues associated with government intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to the hospitality industry. This aligns with the tenets of pragmatism which "emphasizes that we understand the world and solve its problems through the application of subjective and objective methods. Pragmatist researchers are flexible and practical in finding viable solutions to the phenomenon under inquiry" (Elgeddawy & Abouraia, 2024:71). Therefore, pragmatism is relevant in trying to understand government interventions in necessary situations like the pandemic as it gears towards solving practical

challenges in the real-world (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). The second perspective used in the study is the constructivism paradigm, a theory that gives individuals (e.g., the respondents) liberty to make meaning from the information they receive. This theory is relevant to this study as it looks at how hospitality staff perceive government interventions during COVID-19. Scholars like Bada put constructivism as follows, "the theory suggests that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences" (Bada, 2015, p.66). This gives room for results to be grounded in the perspectives of the respondents, which will reflect real situations from the experiences of the respondents on the subject of the study -government intervention in COVID-19.

The study adopts the constructivism cum pragmatic approaches as they appear to be the best fit for the aim(s) of the study. First, government interventions in the hospitality industry during COVID-19 can only be understood from the perspectives of the actors and participants in the sector, and this is the position of the constructivism paradigm. Second, from a pragmatic point of view, the need for action to save the hospitality industry was inevitable during the 2020 pandemic.

Third, there is a need for action-oriented study to prepare policy and policy makers on how best to handle similar situations in the future.

Literature Review

Nigeria's tourism and hospitality sector

The hospitality industry in Nigeria appears to have its roots in the arrival of missionaries who set up or built rest houses and provided catering services for evangelists. But, the initial catering services were credited to the Nigeria Railway Caterers Limited for building Guest Houses to take care of railway workers and travelers (Ugbaja, 2024). Meanwhile, modern hotels in Nigeria seem to date back to the early 1940s with the Lagos Airport Hotel opening in 1942. Then, by the 1950s, hotels like Bristol Hotel (popular due to its association as a location for signing Nigeria's independence declaration), Federal Palace (nigerianstat.gov.ng), among others were established in 1956. With the development of tourism and hospitality in Nigeria, an increase in commercial activities may have triggered the hospitality industry to spring up rapidly, especially in major cities and capitals of different states in Nigeria. Moreover, with tourism, hospitality

becomes an integral part of the accommodation sector, because it is believed that it attracts about fifty percent of visitors expenses (Durodola & Oloyede, 2011 as cited in Amalu & Ajake, 2015). It is these expenses from visitors/travelers/tourists that yield the income that makes tourism and hospitality attractive to the government and private investors.

There are numerous studies on the values and benefits associated with the tourism and hospitality sector. According to Ugbaja (2024), "hospitality industry encompasses many subsectors: lodging, food services, gaming, cruise line and travel. The industry generates substantial direct and indirect revenues for local and regional economies, create employment and contribute to national development..." (p.194). Specifically, the sector is known for creating jobs, apart from its gross earnings for the accommodation sector which rose from N638, 978.08 million in 2010 to N683, 866.49 million in 2011, and N730, 104.70 by 2012(nigerianstat.gov.ng). Nigeria was ranked second in Africa in hotel investment in the year, 2023 (Ekeng, 2024); and it is projected that revenue from the hotel market will reach about US\$1.67billion by 2025, with an expected

annual growth rate of 11.75% within 2025-2029, which is projected to a market volume of US\$2.61bn by 2029 (www.statista.com). From the foregoing, the hospitality sector is of high economic value, and the government derives taxes (income) from it, while its value in terms of employment cannot be overemphasized. Despite these projections and benefits, COVID-19 was a major challenge to the sector in 2020, which made some businesses of the hospitality industry in Nigeria to shut down their activities.

The Institute of Tourism Professionals of Nigeria (ITPN) made a plea for the government to allocate N45.5 billion as part of an economic recovery plan for the tourism industry through the then president of the institute, Mr. Abiodun Odusanwo (Oyebade, 2020). In 2020, the Federal government of Nigeria, through the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) established an N50billion Naira stimulus package to assist in cushioning the impact of COVID-19 on households, Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), and the Creative industry (Nwanne, 2020). Meanwhile, Nigeria's hospitality and tourism businesses fall within the category of Micro and Small businesses based on the

classification made by Alhaji Nura Kangiwa, the then Director- General, National Institute for Hospitality and Tourism (NIHOTOUR) in Nigeria (Agency Report, 2021).

The federal government of Nigeria opened a website [<http://www.survivalfund.ng>] in September 2020 for people to register and get financial support due to the effect of COVID-19. The portal was opened for businesses in the hospitality industry on Friday, September 25, 2020, starting from midnight (News Agency of Nigeria, 2020). The then Minister of Labor, Employment and Productivity, Dr. Chris Ngige, added that funds were released by the federal government, as an effort to prevent the retrenchment of staff in the Private Sector due to COVID-19, especially hotels. The government released the sum of N37 billion Naira, for the implementation of the Survival Fund as a component of Nigeria's N2.3 trillion Economic Sustainability Plan (ESP) (Okonkwo, 2021) to help cushion the effects of the pandemic in the country. Therefore, given the above scenario, the study is set to assess how many hotels and hotel staff members received the financial support and its impact on the

management of the hospitality industry in the study area.

Previous studies

With the advent of COVID-19, there is enormous literature from different scholars with different disciplinary biases. Ather et al. (2020) have written extensively on COVID-19, and the health sector; and others have written on its impact on the economy (e.g., Fernandes, 2020; Ozili & Arun, 2020; Fornaro & Wolf, 2020). The media coverage of issues associated with COVID-19, particularly newspaper framing of COVID-19 vaccination controversies, and how it affected the public attitude in taking vaccines concerning the virus have been studied extensively by Ibenyenwa, et al. (2024). Economically, the pandemic plunged some economies like that of Nigeria into debt (Ulu, et al., 2024). Specifically, within the tourism and hospitality sector, extant literature showed studies on COVID-19, such as the impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry, using hotels in Nairobi and Mombasa (Sahoo et al., 2021); also in Ghana, assessment of COVID-19 impact on hotels in Accra and Kumasi (Deri et al., 2021) were carried out.

Within Nigeria, Oruonye and Ahmed (2020) explained that about thirty-five thousand (35,000) workers with the National Association of Nigerian Travel Agencies (NANTA) seem to have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Ocheni, et al., (2020) discussed COVID-19 and the tourism industry (aviation, cruise-shipping, and hospitality); Bello and Bello (2021) studied the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hospitality industry in Nigeria holistically, without being specific about a particular region. Scholars like Abubakar, et al. (2021) carried out a study in Northwestern Nigeria, using Kano and Kaduna states as case studies, to look at the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19 in the region, while Anunobi et al (2021) studied COVID-19 and hotel service delivery in Nsukka (Enugu State) looking at the changes and challenges associated with the coronavirus pandemic. A perusal of different studies in Nigeria with reference to COVID-19 and the hospitality sector shows a lot of interest from different scholars and regions in Nigeria, and highlights varieties of challenges and perspectives on the deadly virus, with the majority pointing at its negative impact.

It is worth noting that the Federal Government of Nigeria assisted the tourism sector during the COVID-19 pandemic as reported in some of the national dailies. Alhaji Nura Kangiwa, the Director-General of the National Institute for Hospitality and Tourism (NIHOTOUR), admitted thus, "Most of Nigeria's hospitality and tourism businesses fall into the category of Micro and Small businesses; as such they will require external financial support to rid out the effects of COVID-19 on their businesses. Thankfully, the federal government of Nigeria has been proactive and has since included the hospitality and tourism businesses among the early receipts of the Survival Fund managed by the Ministry of Finance. I am aware that the federal government has started giving some financial support to some hotels, travel agents, and tour operators across Nigeria" (Osaje, 2021). This assertion drives the objectives of this study, to comprehend the empiricism of the above assertion and how useful it was to the receivers, or, was it a mere rhetoric from the ruling class?

Given this background, there seems to be a paucity of literature on government interventions or assistance to the hospitality sector in Nigeria during

the pandemic, and the implications of such assistance, though previous studies (Anunobi et al., 2021) suggested the need for financial support from the government in circumstances like COVID-19, in order to assist the hospitality sector in Nigeria. Therefore, this study tries to examine government's assistance to hospitality operators in Nigeria during the pandemic. A study of this nature is a valuable contribution to COVID-19 scholarship, while its implications for hospitality operators and tourism stakeholders in an emerging economy like Nigeria are also essential. The study will serve as a guide for similar situations in the future, and on how to keep the industry afloat in related circumstances.

Government intervention during COVID-19 in Nigeria

From medical reports, the person who brought COVID-19 to Nigeria was discovered by Dr. Amarachukwu Allison. . He was an Italian consultant, who traveled to Ewekoro in Ewekoro Local Government Area of Ogun state, and went to a private facility with the complain of having fever, headache, muscle pain and fatigue. From there he was transferred to an isolation center in Lagos (Abraham & Busari, 2020; Oyeleke, 2020); and later confirmed of having

COVID-19 by the Virology Laboratory scientists of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (Ehanire, 2020). From this, the virus spread to different parts of Nigeria as it is easily contracted through contact with an infected person(s), either via "tiny droplet infection when people sneeze, cough, or talk, or by contacts with contaminated surfaces" (Jacobs & Okeke, 2022:1). The government reacted swiftly to curb and control the spread of the virus by implementing social distancing, stay-at-home policy, compulsory use of face-mask, banning of public gatherings and total lockdown (Umanah & Willie, 2022). This affected movements, and many hospitality workers were laid off from work (Ollor, 2023), while some establishments closed entirely due to lack of patronage.

There were several calls from tourism stakeholders for government's assistance during the pandemic, as many players experienced unprecedented overhead costs, leading to the laying off of staff, shutting down of facilities (i.e. hotels), and canceling travel and hotel bookings (which led to more losses). Sadly, some of these losses are in billions. The federal government of Nigeria on April 1, 2020, announced that it would give a token of N20, 000.00

(twenty thousand naira) translating to US\$52 as of then, to people who are registered with the National Social Register (NSR). This token was targeted to reach about three million, six hundred thousand (3.6 million) people which would amount to N72, 000,000,000 (US\$187200000). The essence of this financial assistance was to reduce pressure on the proletarians in Nigeria (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Interventions in the hospitality sector during COVID-19

Reduction in taxes

Foo et al. (2020) reported that the Malaysian government itemized some incentives for tourism businesses during the pandemic, such as discounted electricity bills, reduced training expenses, financial reliefs for businesses affected by COVID-19 through banks, wage subsidies to assist employers to retain their employees, etc. Similarly, tourism stakeholders from travel agencies, accommodation, and restaurant businesses were all given grants and financial assistance during the pandemic period. Tourism stakeholders in Romania all admitted that the 'State aid scheme for HORECA sector was part of government's effort to assist the

tourism sector and the hospitality industry. This fund covered the expenses of companies before the year of the pandemic; tourism stakeholders were satisfied with the provision of the fund (Eurofund, 2021a; Cehan & Iatu, 2023).

Within Nigeria, the government during the pandemic, decided to shift the date of new electricity tariffs, slash the price of fuel and reduce custom duties. The CBN promised to inject 1.1 trillion naira (\$3 billion) into the crucial sector of the economy, among others. However, it was reported that some of these promises were mere political statements (Jammal et al., 2021).

Financial and Fiscal interventions

Governments of different countries proposed different means of assisting the hospitality sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interventions and the need for them were recorded in a study in Italy (Del Chiappa et al., 2021). Mortgages, non-refundable contributions, facilitated public financing, tax reduction and cancellation, tourist tax reduction/cancellation, etc. were among the expected interventions needed by the respondents in Del Chiappa et al. (2021) from the Italian government to remain afloat in business.

Similarly, in the United States of America, the government announced different forms of interventions. On March 18, 2020, the administration of Trump signed a \$100 billion COVID-19 emergency aid which included paid leave for workers. With this announcement, some positive changes returned in the hospitality sector in the United States of America. The government later added income support, which was meant to cover the salaries of people who lost their jobs or people who could not work (Aharon et al., 2021). A similar gesture was announced in Nigeria, when the government announced that it will give out \$52 to individuals registered with the National Social Register (NSR). The gesture was targeted at about 3.6 million beneficiaries which amounts to US\$187, 200, 000. This intervention reduced tension, fear, and anxiety among the proletariats and increased the money in circulation in the economy (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Additionally, within the hospitality sector, in 2020, the Federal government of Nigeria, through the Central Bank of Nigeria, established a N50billion stimulus package to assist in cushioning the impact of COVID-19 on households, Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), and the Creative industry (Nwanne, 2020). Nigeria's

hospitality and tourism businesses fall within the classification of Micro and Small businesses category (Agency Report, 2021). This study aims to investigate whether the hotels in Nigeria benefitted from this promise of financial support or it was just a political propaganda.

Social distancing and lockdown

The commonest government interventions across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic were the social distancing and limited human movements (lockdown). In West Africa, the government of Ghana announced a lockdown and limited movement; thus:

"The hotels and hospital subsector of the tourism industry have had their share of the challenges from the Covid-19 partial lockdown policy of the government of Ghana. Their government announced partial lockdown of some cities like Accra and Kumasi to minimize the spread of the virus, "stay-at-home policy" and "social distancing" movement

restrictions and most hotels were greatly affected to the extent of closing down. With managers closing entirely hotel rooms, restaurants, and bars was the reality that the virus was hitting home hence having negative effects on hotel businesses" (Nuong et al., 2020, p.35).

It is important to note that while these lockdowns and social distancing were part of measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19, they impacted negatively on the hospitality sector, as most hotels closed down, and their workers disengaged, leading to more economic crisis. Sahoo et al. (2021) noted that in Kenya the closure of borders and the general lockdown affected the demand for tourism, and the hospitality sector closed down. By implication, social distancing means that the industry is properly shut; it is the hospitality industry that first experiences loss of jobs in large numbers.

Issues with government support policies during COVID-19

Accessibility

It was reported that the government made provisions for different facilities and for tourism workers, especially those in the hospitality sector. This is because, the government seemed to have the responsibility of designing useful policies and methods for ensuring the survival of the hospitality sector from the COVID-19 pandemic (Wong & Lai, 2022). It was reported in Romania that about 62.2% of the people in the accommodation unit of the hospitality sector, and 71.1% of those in museums did not benefit from the Romanian government support during COVID-19 due to poor accessibility of support policies (Cehan & Iațu, 2023). This indicates that the majority of tourism stakeholders in Romania could be unaware of government policies, or have the view that the policies did not include them due to the nature of the services they offer; or still, failed to show interest in the support due to a lack of trust in government.

Perception

There are different views of government interventions in COVID-19. Across the globe, different people perceive

government interventions differently. In countries like Romania, 'It is easily noticeable that there is a spreading discontent regarding governments' responses to the crisis, for all geographical scales the predominant perception being that there was no support offered by the government or that it was a very insignificant one' (Cehan & Iațu, 2023, p.132). This perceived discontent may have made some establishments not to know if there is intervention or not, and the government may not have known that people were unhappy with their attitude.

Findings

Restricted human movement & indoor order

There was a unanimous agreement between staff members of ASMCET and other participants from hotels in Awka metropolis on the existence of government intervention during the pandemic. There was an order on '*indoors or restricted human movement*'. This restriction was to limit the spread of the Coronavirus which was believed to be highly infectious and could be easily contracted through human interactions. The Department of Hospitality, ASMCET enforced this order

of indoors or restricted human movements in hotels in Anambra State, not only in Awka, the capital city, but all hotels in Anambra were given guidelines on how to operate. All the respondents confirmed this, noting that they did not see a single customer in days.

Hand sanitizers & subsidized infrared thermometer

The hotels were given hand sanitizers by both governmental and non-governmental organizations to be kept at the entrance of every hotel for constant washing of hands. One of the hotel managers added that the government subsidized the prices of hand-held thermometers for hotels during COVID-19 so that each hotel could have at least one to check their visitors. The digital thermometer comes in various sizes and forms; and it mainly works with infrared so that there is a distance between the person holding it and the customer to be checked.

Financial assistance

There is no record of financial assistance to any of the hotels in the study area, Awka, Anambra State. All the respondents confirmed that the Anambra State government did not send any financial incentive to their hotels or any

other hotel in the state. This caused most of the hotels in Awka to close down during COVID-19, and some of them did not survive the pandemic's effect as a result of lack of funding. Almost all the respondents from the selected hotels in Awka metropolis were of the view that none of them received any financial support from the government whether State or Federal during the COVID-19. To some of them, it was in this research that they heard about such, thus: "No hotel staff in Awka received a dime. I am hearing the issue of financial assistance from the government from you for the first time" (Respondent 7, Hotel Manager, Mr. P. Azike, personal communication, 19 March, 2024). Conversely, the staff members of the hospitality department in the state admitted that there were financial provisions for the hospitality industry nationwide, but there seemed to be some challenges with the distribution. Hence, one of the respondents from the Awka hotels puts it this way: "The said Federal Government financial intervention did not get to those it was meant for. It was hijacked by politicians. Nigeria tends to politicize everything" (Respondent 8 a hotel manager, Mr Chigozie Azubike, personal communication, 15 March, 2024). However, this respondent, Mr. Chigozie,

admitted that their hotel got a small loan of less than three million naira (<3,000,000.00), from the twenty-five million naira loan they requested during COVID-19 from the Nigeria Incentive-Based Risk Sharing System for Agricultural Lending (NIRSAL).

In addition, it was reported that the financial support from the government for employers in the hospitality sector did not get to Anambra State as a whole, hence, most workers lost their jobs, while some stayed at home, and some willingly left their jobs. One of the respondents who has worked for over eight (8) years in GeoGold hotel made the following remarks:

There was no financial assistance, workers left the hotel then. It was only the manager, supervisor, accountant, and front desk officer that were left. Nnah eeh! Hapu okwu, agu mere mmadu ife na COVID-19 [Loosely translatable as: please do not mention, during COVID-19 hunger dealt with us] (Respondent 5 a hotel supervisor, personal

communication, 19 March, 2024).

The benefits of government interventions in the hospitality sector during COVID-19 using selected hotels in Awka, Anambra State.

One notable benefit of government intervention during COVID-19 was the curtailing of the spreading of the virus through the restriction of human movement. The *sit-at-home* order by the government prevented people from moving about during the COVID-19 to avoid the spreading of the virus; hence, no hotel recorded any casualty within the study area. All the hotel respondents agreed that the order affected their businesses as there was no patronage during the period. It was a benefit to humanity and financial loss to the hotels in Awka, according to two respondents from GeoGold and Haavila Suite.

Government interventions on hospitality during pandemic like COVID-19 and future implications

The first major implication of government interventions during COVID-19 was low or zero patronage to hotels in the study area. Customers stopped coming as movement was restricted. This made the

management of all the hotels to stop their workers from working because there was no fund to pay them; there was no main status and existing daily protocols in the hotels. This decision made some hotels drop from the hospitality business. A respondent avers that:

Management funding hotels during COVID-19 was very difficult; hotels cannot pay staff. Olde English (a popular hotel in Awka) hotel shut down during Covid-19, Meloch went down. It was Covid-19 that 'killed' Olde English" (Respondent 7 a hotel manager, personal communication, 14 March, 2024).

However, Meloch Hotel resumed business again, after the COVID-19 pandemic. All the respondents agreed that it was obvious that the sit-at-home order affected hotels within Awka and beyond, as it was a national order. Some hotels that closed during the pandemic did not return after it, like Olde English, a respondent from Haavila Suite added. The introduction of hand sanitizers and digital thermometers helped in

controlling the spread of the virus within and outside the hospitality sector in the state. Even sit-at-home was also useful in containing the spread of the virus.

Future implications of government interventions

The study has shown that the government of Nigeria (both at state and federal levels) was taken unawares by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, there were limited state government interventions due to limited funding across the states, like Anambra. Although state governments with other NGOs were quick in providing sanitizers, and digital thermometers for checking in the available guests coming to hotels, there was need for more interventions, especially in the area of funding which would have kept some of the hotels afloat during and after the pandemic, and could have helped in staff retention and other coping measures.

Therefore, there is need for the states to have an emergency fund. Such funds would go a long way in assisting hospitality managers in similar scenarios as COVID-19 in the future. All the respondents in the hotel sector admitted that they pay taxes to the state government, yet, during COVID-19, no

financial support was gotten from the same state government. Some of the respondents reacted to the issue of future implications of financial interventions, as seen in the extracts below.

"there is a need for something (funds) to be prepared for emergencies like Covid-19" (Respondent 1, Staff of hospitality department in ASMCET, personal communication, 22 March, 2024).

Similarly, other respondents explained thus:

"National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) should plan because they exist for such things. They should equally cater for emergencies in the hotel industry" (Respondent 8 a hotel manager, personal communication, 19 March, 2024).

"If something like COVID-19 comes again let government assist us, but we do not pray for such" (Respondent 9 a female hotel supervisor,

personal communication, 19 March, 2024).

Discussion

The pandemic from late 2019 to early 2020 dealt negatively on the hospitality sector in Anambra State, causing loss of jobs, half-payment to workers, and outright closure of some hotels. Existing literature showed that this was also applicable to other places in Nigeria and outside Nigeria, such as the northwestern region of Nigeria (Ahmad et al., 2021), Kenya (Sahoo et al., 2021) and Ghana (Deri et al., 2021). The current study corroborates previous findings on the effects of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry, such as loss of jobs, which was supported by all the respondents in the study. Information concerning government financial intervention during the pandemic seems limited, as most of the hotel respondents admitted that none of their staff members received government financial assistance to workers. Although some of the respondents admitted hearing about it, they could not access or receive any financial palliative.

The poor presentation and disbursement of financial interventions caused hotels in Awka to be left out of the federal

government's financial support to small and medium-scale industries. This underscores the argument of Jammal et al. (2021) that government interventions are mere political statements. Some of the hotel managers admitted that government financial support or interventions are being politicized. One of the respondents expressed thus:

Anambra is under the All-Progressive Grand Alliance-APGA as a political party, and you think, if the government brings intervention, it will go to a state controlled by an opposition party? Think about it (Respondent 8, a hotel manager, personal communication, 25, March, 2024).

The above assertions show that hotels in Anambra including Awka may have been deliberately sidelined from the financial intervention from the government during the pandemic, and this is not a good sign for the sustainable development of the hospitality industry in Awka. This is why the current study is significant in addressing the need for proper documentation of government

interventions, irrespective of the state government's political party affiliation(s).

Furthermore, the study also revealed that the Nigerian government ought to use the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) to intervene in the hospitality industry, as the pandemic was also considered an emergency by some respondents. This is because it appears that the government was ill-prepared during the pandemic. Also, there is a need for proper information to be circulated to all stakeholders in the hospitality sector during circumstances like COVID-19, as some respondents claimed they were not aware, while the ones that were aware did not get any funding. It appears that state government's limited information on the federal government interventions during the pandemic was an intentional or normal practice as such was also recorded in Romania, where some tourism stakeholders were not aware of the details of some government financial policies during COVID-19 (Cehan & Iașu, 2023). On this note, there is a need for a proper briefing of all hospitality stakeholders in Anambra State and Nigeria at large whenever a similar circumstance occurs in the future, for equitable distribution of government financial interventions.

This study opines, from the comments of the respondents that there is so much responsibility on the part of the government if a scenario like COVID-19 should repeat itself. The study has demonstrated that the mismanagement of COVID-19 details and information on government financial assistance, and the silence of the state government in assisting the hospitality sector during the pandemic, caused not just the loss of jobs witnessed, but the closure of some hotels, which was in turn a loss of revenue to the government.

Conclusion

Hotels in Awka, Anambra State confirmed that government policies such as *sit-at-home* both at the federal and state levels curtailed the spread of the virus, due to limited human movement, as well as other similar measures such as use of face masks, and social distancing. The Federal Government of Nigeria during the pandemic released funds for assistance to different sectors, including the hospitality industry, but, there was no financial assistance from the Anambra State government. However, the federal government financial aid to the hospitality sector appeared as a mere propaganda as none of the respondents admitted getting any financial assistance

from state or federal government.

Therefore, this study recommends that tourism stakeholders should always set aside some funds to safeguard establishments like the hospitality sector and its workers from the pains and losses associated with natural uncertainties such as COVID-19. Secondly, a study of this nature is useful for future planning so that the government will know how best to engage hospitality stakeholders for equitable distribution of resources in the sector during emergencies.

Moreover, there is a need for the Anambra State government to set up emergency funds for the hospitality industry since this sector pays taxes to the state. Such emergency funding will be useful in reducing unemployment during unplanned circumstances like COVID-19. Also, while interventions like *sit-at-home* orders were meant to keep people away from one another, the impact(s) of any intervention (especially *sit-at-home*) need to be weighed before implementation, as the same government that ordered human restrictions can order funds to be made available to all hospitality establishments that are up to date with payment of taxes. Options like subventions and tax rebates may be used to assist hospitality operators in occasions like COVID-19. This will be an

invaluable assistance to hospitality operators and an encouragement to future investors, as it will guarantee government's interest in the sector. Finally, a major limitation to this study is the sample size which made

making generalizations difficult. Future studies need to extend to hotel samples from other cities in the state (i.e. Onitsha, Ekwulobia, Nnewi), and other states (i.e. major cities) in the southeastern region of Nigeria. And the possibility of this study beyond Igboland can be explored.

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