

# Fuel Scarcity

Paul A. Adekunle<sup>1</sup>, Matthew N. O. Sadiku<sup>2</sup>, Janet O. Sadiku<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>International Institute of Professional Security, Lagos, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Roy G. Perry College of Engineering, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX, USA

<sup>3</sup>Juliana King University, Houston, TX, USA

## ABSTRACT

Fuel scarcity is a critical challenge in many developing economies, most particularly in Nigeria, where it persists despite the country's status as a major crude oil producer. This phenomenon is characterized by the insufficient supply of petroleum products to meet demand, therefore leading to widespread economic and social disruptions. Some of the causes of fuel scarcity also depends on inadequate refining capacity, heavy dependence on fuel imports, foreign exchange constraints, infrastructural deficiencies, policy inconsistencies, and systemic corruption within the distribution system. There are as well the far-reaching effects of fuel shortages, like inflation, increased transportation costs, reduced industrial productivity, cum the decline in the general standard of living of the people. The paper delves into discussing on the causes, challenges, and probable sustainable solutions to mitigate the recurring nature of fuel scarcity in developing countries like Nigeria.

**KEYWORDS:** Fuel scarcity, developing countries, Nigeria, fuel imports, refineries, systemic corruption, inflation, hike in transportation costs, reduced industrial productivity, standard of living/poverty, infrastructural deficiencies, foreign exchange.

## INTRODUCTION

The constant availability of fuel is a fundamental driver of economic activities, providing energy for transportation, industrial operations, electricity generation, and domestic use, as shown in Figure 1. In developing countries such as Nigeria, the availability and affordability of petroleum products – particularly Premium Motor Spirit (PMS/petrol), diesel, and kerosene – are crucial determinants of economic stability and societal well-being. Despite being one of African's largest producers of crude oil and exporter, Nigeria continues to experience chronic or persistent or periodic fuel scarcity because it imports approximately 70% of refined products after exporting crude for overseas refining in spite of existing demand - a paradox that has attracted significant academic and policy attention [1]. Nigeria daily national consumption is approximately 70 million litres of petrol while local capacity has historically been inadequate as a result of breakdowns cum underinvestment in Nigeria's 4 state refineries. Nigeria has four federal government-owned refineries and several private/modular refineries, as shown in Figure 2.

Fuel scarcity refers to a situation in which the supply of petroleum products falls short of demand, leading to shortages, price hikes, and disruptions across various sectors of the economy [2]. In Nigeria, this has always been a recurrent event, often manifesting in long queues at filling stations, station closures, black market sales, price hikes above official rates, increased transportation costs, and reduced access to essential services, as shown in Figures 3 and 4. This is due to several interrelated factors such as inadequate domestic refining capacity, heavy reliance on imported refined petroleum products, foreign exchange constraints, infrastructural deficiencies, and policy inconsistencies [3].

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- 1970s: Fuel subsidies was introduced after the 1973 oil-price shock to keep the pump prices below market rates. This created a fixed-price system vulnerable to global price swings.
- 2012: This was the first major attempt to remove subsidy by President Goodluck Jonathan that caused prices to jump N65 'n N140/litre.

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#OccupyNigeria protests for 2 weeks forced reinstatement at N97/litre, as shown in Figure 5. In addition, a 2012 probe found \$6 billion fraud in subsidy payments.

- 2015-2023: Buhari administration spent N11.7 trillion (\$26 billion) on subsidies 2016-2023, yet scarcity persisted due to NNPC import monopoly, forex shortages, hoarding, and smuggling.
- May 29, 2023: President Tinubu removed subsidy. Prices rose N185 'n N1,025/litre by 2024. Scarcity continued due to forex, distribution bottlenecks, and infrastructure issues.

**The key drivers of scarcity:** These are known to be:

1. Refining gap: The reliance on imports exposes supply to forex availability, global prices, and port delays. Even with Dangote Refinery (September 2024), Nigeria was said to have imported \$10.00 bn refined fuel in 2025.
2. Pricing policy: Subsidy regime kept prices artificially low at N185/litre pre-2023, thereby encouraged smuggling to Niger, Benin, Cameroon, and Togo, where fuel was 3.7x more expensive. Post-subsidy, forex (FX) volatility pushed prices to N1,030+/litre.
3. Distribution failures: These are as a result of pipeline vandalism, bad roads, channel saltation, and thunderstorms that disrupt trucking. NNPC has cited “heavy rains, lightning” in 2024 as causes.
4. Smuggling and diversion: NNPC estimated 58M litres/day smuggled in 2022. Border states saw 37.8% drop in fuel movement post-subsidy vs. 27.2% for non-border states, indicating smuggling scale. Moreover, smuggling has persisted after post-subsidy due to devaluation leading to naira crash from 460/\$ to 1,700/\$ in 2024, making CFA stronger, such that Nigerian fuel got relatively cheaper even as naira price rose.

5. Hoarding: This is the situation when marketers shut stations during policy uncertainty or before expected price hikes.

**Economic and social impact:** The social and economic impact include:

1. Inflation driver: Energy is identified as the top inflation factor at 91.5% for firms, 83.2% for households. Headline inflation hit 34.6% November 2024.
2. Transport and business: During fuel scarcity, fares spike, queues of 1km+ occur, and while black market can sell for N12,000/10 litres. Truckload cost rose from N7m to N47m in 16 months, threatening 10,000 marketers.
3. Consumption collapse: The daily use fell 28% from 68.35M to 49.27M litres/day from June 2023 – June 2025 as prices rose.
4. Public response: Afrobarometer 2025: Stated that 85% disapproved of subsidy removal, and while 58% wanted reinstatement even if health/education budgets are cut.

**Persistence of scarcity despite oil wealth:** The reason why the scarcity of fuel persists despite oil wealth is because Nigeria’s “resource curse” crude abundance without refining capacity – means it buys back its own oil at international prices. Subsidies masked this by socializing the cost, but created \$10 bn/year fiscal drain, corruption, and smuggling. Removal exposed consumers to full market/FX rates but hasn’t fixed refineries, pipelines, or distribution.

This boils down to the fact that the issue of fuel scarcity in Nigeria is not just lack of crude oil, but a systemic failure of refining, pricing, infrastructure, and governance. It functions as both an economic indicator and a trigger for social protest, from #OccupyNigeria 2012 to cost-of-living crises 2023-2025 [4-12], as shown in Figure 6.

## REFINERIES IN NIGERIA

Nigeria has four federal government-owned refineries and several private/modular refineries. Below are the key refineries in Nigeria [13, 14]:

### 1. Federal Government-Owned Refineries (NNPC)

	Refinery	Location	State	Capacity	Status
i	Old Port Harcourt Refinery 1965	Alesa-Eleme	Rivers State	60,000 bpd	Commissioned
ii	New Port Harcourt Refinery	Alesa-Eleme	Rivers State	150,000 bpd	Combined PHRC = 210,000 bpd
iii	Warri Refinery & Petro chemical Co. (WRPC) 1978	Ekpan, Warri	Delta State	125,000 bpd	Commissioned
iv	Kaduna Refinery & Petro chemical Co. (KRPC)	Kaduna State	State serve	110,000 bpd	Established to Northern Nigeria

The combined capacity of these 4 FGN-owned refineries is 445,000 bpsd and are managed by NNPC.

## 2. Major Private & Modular Refineries

Refinery	Location	State	Capacity	Notes
<b>Dangote Refinery</b> Commissioned	Lekki Free Trade Zone	Lagos State	650,000 bpd	Largest in Africa. May 2023
<b>Walter Smith</b> Plans to expand	Ibigwe	Imo State	5,000 bpd	Started 2020.
<b>Refinery</b>			50,000 bpd	
<b>OPAC Refinery</b>	Kwale	Delta State	10,000 bpd	Completed 2021
<b>Edo Refinery &amp; Petrochemical Co.</b>	Edo	Edo State	1,000 + 5,000 BPSD; Phase 2 12,000 bpd	Fully operational
<b>Duport Midstream</b> Production	Egbokor, Orhionmwon LGA	Edo State	2,500 bpd	Completed 2022, 2023
<b>Niger Delta Petroleum (Aradel)</b>	Ogbelle	Rivers State	11,000 bpd	3-train modular refinery
<b>Azikel Refinery</b>	Yenagoa	Balyesa State	12,000 bpd	Under development
<b>Atlantic Int'l Refinery</b>	Brass	Bayelsa State	2,000 bpd	Announced 2021

Worthy of note are:

- Total capacity: FGN refineries = 445,000 bpsd. With Dangote + modular refineries, Nigeria's nameplate capacity exceeds 1.1 million bpd as of 2024-2025.
  - Operational status: Many of the FGN refineries have been idle for years undergoing "revamping." Port Harcourt refinery restarted operations late 2023. Warri and Kaduna were expected to resume 2023-2024.
  - Modular refineries: Smaller plants like Walter Smith, OPAC, Duport, Aradel were licensed to boost local refining and reduce import dependence [15].
- Context: Jonathan's government said that Nigeria could not afford subsidies due to fiscal strain. The CBN Governor Sanusi Lamido Sanusi stated that the country spent \$8 billion on subsidy in 2011 and argued "subsidies should be for production not consumption."
  - The protests: The protest was from January 2 – January 16, 2012: It was a large or nationwide protest in Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Port Harcourt and other cities. Labor unions NLC and TUC, civil society groups, and opposition leaders including Bola Tinubu joined.
  - The tactics used involved mass demonstrations, sit-ins, marches, social media mobilization with #OccupyNigeria. The protesters occupied Gani Fawehinmi Park in Lagos and key locations nationwide.
  - The duration of the protests was for 2 weeks (from January 2-16, 2012) which "paralyzed the nation" and with banks, businesses, and schools shut down.
  - The demand was for the reversal of subsidy removal, reduction in fuel price, and accountability for corruption in the subsidy regime.
- Response by the government:**
- On January 7, 2012, President Jonathan addressed the nation, saying subsidy was unsustainable and

promised that the savings would be used to fund youth programs.

- January 16, 2012: After 2 weeks of protests that “nearly escalated into violent unrest”, government partially reversed the policy.
- The outcome was that petrol price was reduced to N97 (\$0.20) per litre and subsidy reinstated. The government also agreed to investigate subsidy fraud.

### Corruption exposed

- 2012 House of Reps probe: The investigation into the subsidy regime revealed \$6 billion fraud involving NNPC officials and marketers in 2012, but smuggling leaked 30-58% of subsidized fuel to neighbors, as shown in Figure 7. It was also discovered that payments were made for fuel that was never delivered. In general, petrol in Nigeria is lower than in neighboring countries, which creates an arbitrage opportunity for traders to buy petrol in Nigeria and sell it in those countries at higher price.
- This revelation fueled public anger, as the protesters argued that the problem was not subsidy itself but corruption in its administration.

### Significance and legacy

- Political: Showed how powerful mass mobilization and social media is in Nigeria. It established a precedent that subsidy removal requires negotiation with labor/civil society
- Policy: Due to public opposition and the inherent potential unrest have not been able to remove fuel subsidy. There has not been major removal attempt until May 29, 2023.
- Social contract: It is being argued by scholars that the 2012 protests were more than fuel price. Nigerians saw subsidies as a “social right” and “part of a social contract.” Protesters are citizens “exercising and claiming the right to participate and negotiate.”
- Opposition involvement: Tinubu, then opposition leader, supported protests against Jonathan. Tinubu later removed subsidy as the President in 2023 [4-6, 15, 16].

### Timeline of Fuel Price Shocks Post-Subsidy (Key Shocks After May 2023)

This is from when President Tinubu took over the realm of governance.

1. May 29, 2023: Tinubu removed subsidy – “subsidy is gone” shock. Price N185 ‘n N500-1000/litre immediate and nationwide.
2. June-July 2023: Price from N488-N617 range

3. April 2024: Price hit N1,415.06/litre up 68.01% YoY from N842.25/litre April 2023 – this brought about queues and fares hike.
4. July-August 2024: Price rose from N770.54/litre ‘n N1,050/litre in days during second 2024 scarcity crisis. Gave rise to NNPC vs IPMAN blame game.
5. September 2024: N568 ‘n N897/litre increase.
6. October 2024: Further hike to N1,030/litre by NNPC. Note that the September-October 2024 brought about the **Ratchet effect**. No longer “scarcity” pricing – new normal.
7. November 2024: Price from N1,030-N1,060.
8. December 2024-March 2025: Price rise from N950-N1,100 range.
9. April 2025-April 2026: Price range depending on state N900-N1,200.

### Ripple Effects

The ripple effects as documented were as stated below:

1. Inflation: Energy number one driver at 91.5% for firms, 83.2% for households. 34.6% headline inflation in November 2024.
2. Hunger: WFP: 26.5m facing acute hunger. While 133m are in multidimensional poverty, as shown in Figures 8 and 9.
3. Transport/Logistics: Truckload cos N7m ‘n N47m. It caused “significant increases in transport fares.” Since the grid power is unreliable cum poor transport system, IISD says subsidy should not be removed without reliable power and transport system.
4. Regional: Niger lost 50% of fuel supply from smuggling. Price hit N8,000/litre in Niamey in March 2024.
5. Public sentiment: 85% disapprove subsidy removal, 58% want it back even if health/education budget is cut.
6. Migration: 63% of adults want to emigrate due to lack of economic opportunity.

Furthermore, as per the above data, the following points need to be noted:

- Price ranges: Pump prices vary by state, station, and month. The figures above are national averages or reported highs from credible news/agency sources.
- Current 2026 range: N980-N1,200/litre is based on Lagos market reports and energy sector briefings, April 2026.

- Dangote impact: Price moderation December 2024-March 2025 reflects partial domestic refining, but full price relief has not materialized yet [9, 17-24].

## ECONOMIC DISTORTIONS IDENTIFIED BY IISD

The followings are some of the identified economic distortions discovered by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD):

- Disincentivizes refining: Cheap imports undercut incentives to fix the country's domestic refineries.
- Regressive: The benefits are captured more by smugglers, marketers, and wealthier car owners than poor households.
- Crowds out development: Debt-funded subsidy diverted funds from health, education, and infrastructure.
- Illegal activity: Subsidy regime is linked to "illegal refining, pipeline vandalism, and other criminal activities."

### The 2023 Subsidy Removal – IISD's Analysis

- **Political consensus:** "As the February 2023 election approached, all three main presidential candidates pledged to abolish the subsidy," which indicated elite agreement.
- **Budget reality:** Buhari's 2023 budget funded subsidy only to June. However, Tinubu chose not to provide supplementary budget, hence making removal inevitable.
- **NNPC support:** NNPC Limited "expressed support for the subsidy removal," noting that government owned it N2.7 trillion (\$6 billion) for subsidy arrears.
- **Warning:** Energy expert Ayodele Oni told Al Jazeera via IISD context: "ensure a reliable power supply and enhance transportation infrastructure to alleviate the costs citizens incur" post-removal.

### IISD Reform Recommendation for Nigeria

- **Preconditions:** That subsidy should not be removed without "reliable power supply and enhanced transportation infrastructure.
- **Transparency:** Need to publish savings and reinvestment plans to build trust.
- **Targeted support:** To replace universal subsidy with cash transfers or sectoral support for the poor/vulnerable.

### Blessing indicators

#### Reserves:

37.2 bn barrels, 10<sup>th</sup> largest world, 2<sup>nd</sup> in Africa

### Curse reality

**Poverty:** 95m Nigerians in multidimensional poverty despite \$800bn + oil rents since 1958

- **Sequencing:** Need to stop corruption in NNPC/marketer chain before expecting public buy-in [4-6, 17].

## TINUBU'S SUBSIDY REMOVAL PROTESTS

After the removal of fuel subsidy by President Bola Hamed Tinubu in 2023, there were protests but was short-lived and largely called off. Unlike the massive #OccupyNigeria protests in 2012, Tinubu's May 29, 2023 subsidy removal saw threats of organized protest that were suspended after government talks. After his inaugural speech, Tinubu declared saying that "subsidy is gone." Queues and panic buying started immediately, prices jumped from N185 to N500-N800/litre within hours. Filling stations hoarded fuel, transport fares doubled/tripled overnight.

There were organized threats and plans for protests/strike by NLC/TUC in June 2023, but they were suspended after government negotiations and a court order. The large-scale, sustained protests came later in 2024 as part of #EndBadGovernance, with subsidy return as a key demand. End police brutality and subsidy removal are not directly linked, but they are linked through the same underlying grievance – i.e., economic hardship and government distrust. The August 2024 protests and the demands expanded beyond fuel to also include: the return of fuel subsidy, end police brutality, and economic + security nexus. In other words, #OccupyNigeria 2012, #EndSARS 2020, and #EndBadGovernance 2024 demands overlap around the same core: accountability, cost of living, and state violence – all three are "resource curse" symptoms [29-30].

### Oil: Curse or Blessing?

It is both – fuel is a blessing turned curse by weak institutions, Nigeria is a case study.

#### 1. The "Resource Curse" Theory:

**Thesis:** Countries rich in oil/minerals often grow slower, have weaker institutions, more conflict than resource-poor peers.

**Why:** Oil rents 'n Dutch Disease, corruption, rent-seeking, neglect of other sectors.

#### 2. Nigeria: Classical Case of the Curse

Scholars "unanimously" present Nigeria as the exemplar [25-31]:

**Production:**

2.4m bpd, 6<sup>th</sup> largest exporter

**Revenue:** Oil = 80% govt revenue, 95% export earnings

**Potential:** Light sweet crude, premium quality

**HDI:** Low human development group; oil wealth caused “lack of promotion of higher standard of living, education, income”

**Diversification dead:** Agriculture “crowded out”, manufacturing neglected, Dutch disease

**Outcomes:** “Waste and corruption from oil...responsible for poor long run economic

Human Development Index (HDI) tells “how are the people doing?” not just “how rich is the country?” For Nigeria, oil raised the GDP but HDI stayed medium (Current HDI of Nigeria is 0.560) because of corruption, poor services, and the resource curse. HDI shows if the GDP actually translates to health, education, and living standards.

Some of the key mechanisms by which blessing becomes a curse are through:

- Dutch Disease: Oil revenue appreciated exchange rate, but made agriculture/manufacturing uncompetitive, leading to de-industrialization. Hence, “agriculture...was gradually crowded out by growing oil sector.”
- Rent-seeking and corruption: “Renting-seeking became the most prominent activity in Nigeria.” The elites fight to control rents, not produce or create value. Easy oil rents replace taxation, and while institutions erode.
- Volatility: Oil swings and boom-bust cycles. Budgets collapse when price falls.
- Weak institutions/Institutional decay: “Political instability; widespread corruption; lack of transparency; disregard for due process, are the result to weakening of institutions.”
- Conflict: Rebels/oil bunkerers (locally called “*kpofire*” operators in the Niger Delta) fight to capture oil sites. Oil funds insurgency. “Industrial bunkering – theft of crude oil by the barge-load...oil oozing from sabotaged pipes.” Book Haram linked to “acute corruption and gross regional inequalities” from oil curse.
- Neglect of human capital: Governments rely on oil, underinvest in education/health.

Findings therefore show that “natural resources are not always a curse; they can be a blessing...for countries with strong institutions,” with Norway as a good example with efficient institutions.

The curse can be escaped via:

1. Strong institutions: Ensure the rule of law, transparency, and accountability. “Strong institutional quality to turn the resource curse...into a blessing.
2. Sovereign wealth funds: Norway model – save oil money, spend only returns.

3. Diversification: Need to invest oil rents in agriculture, manufacturing, education before Dutch disease sets in.
4. Fiscal rules: Delink budget from volatile oil price.
5. Local content: Use oil to build domestic capacity, not just export crude.

**CONCLUSION**

Fuel scarcity in Nigeria post-subsidy removal did not end scarcity but changed the cause. Energy poverty has become the transmission channel for broader crisis leading to inflation, food security, poverty, and migration. Underlying infrastructure deficit makes scarcity inevitable due to lack of reliable power supply and enhanced transportation infrastructure, lack of capacity refining, and poor storage/distribution (as there are no strategic reserves, **Estragos/Escravos channel siltation** equals to national crisis). Estragos or Estravos channel siltation leads to buildup of sand, mud, and sediment in the waterway that makes it too shallow for fuel vessels to pass. This is a recurring cause of Nigeria’s fuel scarcity. In Nigeria, fuel scarcity is no longer a policy problem but a development problem. The subsidy masked 40 years of underinvestment in refining, power, and transport. Its removal therefore exposed the deficit all at once. The quote that sums it up was by the Customs CG Bashir Adewale Adeniyi – “it is still profitable for smugglers...because Nigeria fuel is cheaper” and “prices are dynamic.” Dynamic prices plus broken infrastructure is equal to permanent volatility. More information on Fuel Scarcity in Nigeria can be obtained in the books in [32-47] and the following related journals:

*International Journal of Research and Innovation in Applied Sciences (IJRIAS)*

*International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*

*Journal of Social Sciences and Public Policy*

*International Journal of Engineering and Modern Technology (IJEMT)*

*International Journal of Advances in Applied Sciences (IJAAS)*

*International Journal of Agriculture and Earth Science (IJAES)*

*Journal of Advanced Research in Alternative Energy, Environment and Ecology*

*International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology (IJISRT)*

*Journal of Health & Community Development (JHCD)*

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**Figure 1. Economy of Nigeria**

**Source:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy\\_of\\_Nigeria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Nigeria)



**Figure 2. Oil refinery**

**Source:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil\\_refinery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil_refinery)



**Figure 3. Fuel protests in the United Kingdom**

**Source:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuel\\_protests\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuel_protests_in_the_United_Kingdom)



**Figure 4. Black market**

**Source:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_market](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_market)



**Figure 5. Occupy Nigeria**

**Source:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy\\_Nigeria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Nigeria)



**Figure 6. Global energy crisis**

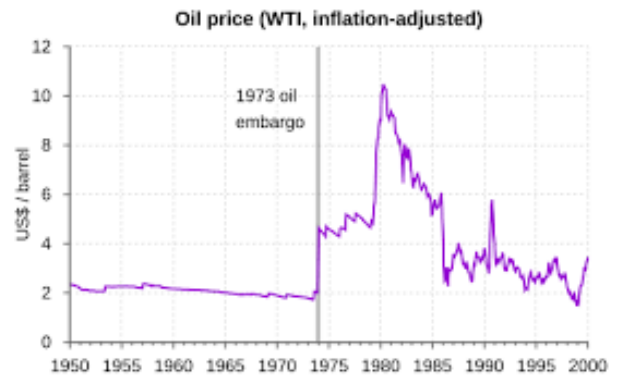
**Source:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global\\_energy\\_crisis\\_\(2021%E2%80%932023\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_energy_crisis_(2021%E2%80%932023))



**Figure 7. Smuggling**

**Source:** <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smuggling>



**Figure 8. 1973 Oil crisis**

**Source:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973\\_oil\\_crisis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973_oil_crisis)



**Figure 9. Food security**

**Source:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food\\_security](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food_security)