



The Impact of Colonial Legacies on the Political and Economic Development of Nigeria: A Critical Analysis of the Structural Adjustment Policies

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Abstract. The implementation of structural adjustment policies (SAP) in Nigeria led to significant economic hardship, yet some individuals benefited from the recession and government actions. The import license regime in the Second Republic fostered the rise of a wealthy class, strengthening political connections. Despite low profits from 1982 to 1984, multinational companies such as United Africa Company, Patterson Zochonis, and Mobil Oil saw substantial gains, while workers experienced widespread retrenchment. SAP created a stark divide between winners and losers. Though SAP aimed to eradicate poverty and transform Africa's economy, its failure to engage with the citizens who needed support most undermined its goals. The policy's inability to adapt to the unique needs of African societies fueled discontent, as many felt it worsened economic hardship, poverty, and inequality. This paper uses historical method of discuss and analysis to explore the impact of colonial legacies on Nigeria's political and economic development, focusing on the consequences of SAP and its role in perpetuating disparities.

Keywords: Colonial Legacies, Structural adjustment policies, Class inequality, Neocolonialism

1. Introduction

Before the January 1966 military coup, Nigeria's government was an alliance of tribally-based parties, with the East and North allied against the West. This arrangement shifted focus from national to regional interests, leading to instability until the military intervention. The issue of inequality and class consciousness became more prominent during the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), exposing socioeconomic and political disparities. The majority of Nigerians suffered under SAP, particularly students, workers, farmers, and businesspeople, who voiced strong opposition through protests and riots. However, it is important to note that Nigeria's

economic challenges cannot be solely attributed to SAP. Other factors, such as mismanagement, corruption, political instability, and ethnic divisions, also contributed. While the IMF/World Bank-led SAP failed to benefit most Nigerians, causing widespread unemployment, it was not the sole cause of Nigeria's economic problems.

The most affected by SAP in Nigeria were the poor and women, as social subsidies and support systems were cut, further marginalizing vulnerable populations. Currency devaluation, a prerequisite for SAP loans, made wages insufficient to meet basic needs, pushing the middle class into poverty. This led to ethnic dissent, particularly in the North, where agriculture and livestock were the primary means of sustenance, unlike the more economically diverse South and East.

Northern Nigeria, with its large population and reliance on agriculture, was hit hard by the removal of subsidies on agricultural products and fertilizers, which further harmed their agrarian economy. The economic hardship created by SAP was particularly severe in this region, justifying their outcry.

Furthermore, Nigeria's amalgamation in 1914, without consulting the diverse ethnic groups, sowed instability and led to post-independence political disunity, mutual distrust, and ongoing ethnic conflicts. The result of this act was the unequal distribution of national resources, favoring northern Nigeria, and the lack of development projects in other regions, sparking ongoing debate. Economic policies such as the subsidized resale of agricultural products and the 1982 Economic Stabilization Act had both positive and negative impacts. The 1980s marked a pivotal moment in development, as many developing countries lost the ability to shape their policies due to the influence of Bretton Woods institutions implementing conditionality-based strategies.

Neoliberal reforms from the late 1970s, championed by leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, promoted free market ideologies and limited state intervention, blaming government involvement for the 1970s economic crisis. Their view emphasized poverty reduction and economic growth through market forces and private enterprises. Consequently, Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) focused on reducing government intervention, promoting market mechanisms as the primary driver for development. The IMF and World Bank regarded government policies as serving individual interests and stressed the negative impact of state intervention.

The debt crisis that hit developing countries in the 1980s compelled the affected countries to turn to multilateral financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF for loans. However, the approval of such loans was based on a set of well-laid conditionality that involved the adoption of stabilization policies and liberalization as a prerequisite for granting loans and debt rescheduling. However, countries that were unwilling to accept the conditionality were immediately excluded from participating. It is imperative to note that the procedure for debt rescheduling by donor countries led to the total eradication of autonomy for developing countries and a transfer of power from the state to the World Bank and IMF. There are several reasons responsible for the 1970s economic crisis which preceded the SAP. They ranged from the excessive financial consuming policies of most advanced capitalist countries to the oil and debt crisis of the 1970s and 1980s.

Nigeria, like most countries in Africa, decided to embark on drastic and radical economic policy reforms from the 1980s. The new policy reform involved an all-encompassing shift from trade restrictions and price control, towards trade liberalization, privatization and less government intervention in the production of goods and services. These reforms were associated with the (SAPs) advocated by the World Bank and the IMF. However, the IMF imposed 'conditionality' were attached to adjustment loans, and brought about increased poverty, inequality and deficient living standards in Nigeria from 1986 to 1993. The crisis that led to the radical economic reforms of the 1980s can be traced to the British colonial administration in Nigeria,

1.1 Background to Structural Adjustment Policies

The unprecedented oil boom enjoyed by Nigeria in the 1970s under being an oil-producing nation had a remarkable impact on her expenditure during this period. Nigeria's economic policy during the 1970s had a welfarist orientation with the government

playing an active role in development; provision of a massive transport system and good road network, health infrastructure, increased rates of employment, rapid increases in food subsidies, transport and education. The government in the 1970s also engaged in a subsidized resale of agricultural products to the masses, a policy abruptly ended by the Shagari government.

The oil and economic crisis of the 1980s hit the oil-dependent Nigerian economy very badly. As a result of this, the Nigerian state borrowed vast sums of money to cushion the effects of this crisis. However, the situation was not made better because of gross mismanagement and corruption in the Nigerian government. Consequently, the related industrial sectors had to close down half of their firms, invariably leading to the layoff of many workers. The Nigerian government faced with this enormous crisis had to; therefore, accept the SAPs as well as the 'conditions' attached to them, in a bid to stop the crisis.

Nigeria's adoption of SAP policies in 1986 followed initial efforts in 1981 under Alhaji Shehu Shagari, who established a commission to examine government parastatals, leading to the 1982 Economic Stabilization Act. This act aimed to control imports, discipline the monetary system, and reduce government spending. However, it failed due to its inability to remove subsidies or commercialize public enterprises, largely due to the National Party of Nigeria's control over parastatals.

As a result, the Shagari government sought an IMF loan of 1.9 billion and 2.4 billion naira. The IMF, however, required conditions like privatization, reduced spending, trade liberalization, and sales tax. No formal agreement was reached before Shagari's ousting in 1983. General Buhari's regime later reached an agreement with the IMF on economic reforms but stalled over key recommendations such as currency devaluation, privatization, and the removal of petroleum subsidies. While accepting the commercialization policy, Buhari insisted on state regulation, which led to a boycott of Nigeria by Western banks and credit agencies. These institutions demanded IMF approval before addressing Nigeria's \$20 billion debt, delaying capital injection.

The alternative approach initiated was a counter trade approach with Brazil and other Western European countries. It was, however, inadequate and costly, especially with the magnitude of economic problems faced by Nigeria. In this light, the regime of General Buhari introduced a comprehensive package of austerity measures as part of its economic stabilization

efforts. This came with severe import restrictions, thus posing a problem for local industries to purchase needed essential imported raw materials, leading most of them to shut down and consequently leading to increased unemployment. The situation was further worsened with inflation in the prices of goods and commodities, thus making life very difficult for the masses and affluent as well. The SAPs also affected the health and educational sectors. Funding reduced drastically in the health sector during this period. The education sector was not spared either due to the privatization of schools and subsequent heavy levies indiscriminately imposed on parents of students in schools, as well as the withdrawal of government sponsorships on tertiary schools' students.

The legitimacy of Buhari's regime became questionable as a result of his authoritarian rule, and Gen Ibrahim Babangida deposed him in August 1985. With Nigeria still suffering from the effects of a heavy debt burden, coupled with a decline in oil revenues, Babangida's regime re-opened the debate on the terms and acceptance of the IMF loans and conditionalities and the government's role in the management of the economic crisis. Despite the protest of the Nigerian masses, the regime of Babangida went ahead to accept the IMF adjustment policies as well as the adjustment of the naira to its actual realistic value.

2. Political and Economic Development of Nigeria from 1960-1985

Nigeria's attainment of independence on October 1, 1960, which was a culmination of post- World War II constitutional nationalism, had brought with it high expectations that Africa's most populous country, with enormous resources, would make a great success of its new-found freedom, and democracy. However, the expectations quickly turned out to be misplaced. Between 1962 and 1965, Nigeria's first democratic government since 1914, grappled with one crisis after another. The teething problem overwhelmed the polity and brought about a bloody military coup d' tat on January 15, 1966, which terminated what is generally regarded as Nigeria's First Republic, 1960-1966.

Scholars (Post & Vickers 1973, Dudley 1982, Osaghae 2011) identify the genesis of the crisis with the internal turmoil which engulfed the Action Group party in power in Western Nigeria in 1962, culminating in the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo, its leader who was also the leader of the opposition in Nigeria's Westminster Parliamentary democratic system. There was also the crisis over the conduct of a national population census in 1962-63, which was politicized because its outcome determined constituency

delimitations, and, therefore, given Nigeria's ethnic-regional politics, the character and composition of the central government to be produced in general elections scheduled for December 1966. The recent polls became contentious and brought the country on the brink of a precipice. The two parties which controlled Nigeria's central government, the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) that had contested the elections based on an alliance of parties had, through opportunistic compromises made up a unitary government. It was expected that they would demonstrate their strength and conclusively resolve their contest for supremacy in the 1965 West Regional Parliamentary election. The latter was rigged and frustrated the aspirations of the NCNC to entrench itself in power in subsequent elections, in addition to defeating Western Nigerians' expectations of an opportunity to demonstrate solidarity with their jailed leader. Violence, including arson and killings, erupted in the region and culminated in the military seizure of power in January 1966.

The crisis which bedeviled Nigeria's First Republic has been attributed to several reasons. One, the general election of 1959 that produced Nigeria's first post-independence government was the democratic primary election in Nigeria since the amalgamation of 1914. Consequently, Nigeria's early post-independence leaders had no exposure and experience in democratic governance, given that colonial rule did not consult adequately with the people. Besides, Nigerian politics was ethno-regional, not only because of the effects of notably the 1946 Richards and 1951 Macpherson constitutions on promoting and consolidating parochialism. It was also due to the scuttling of accentuation on national consciousness by the introduction of carpet-crossing in the Western Region by the Awolowo-led Action Group to frustrate Azikiwe, Nigeria's foremost nationalist from going into the Western House of Assembly in 1951. Abubakar (2008) notes that the "episode marked a regrettable turning point in the history of politics and parliamentary democracy in Nigeria," given that subsequently, each of Nigeria's three regions at the time "became the ethnic nest of the predominant groups within it and ethnicity became the bane of Nigeria's politics."

Given the ethnicity and suspicion which characterized Nigerian politics, the 1959 elections could not produce a national party with a clear majority in parliament to single-handedly form the first government of post-colonial Nigeria. Nigeria's first democratic government was, therefore, led by a coalition of parties, namely the NPC and NCNC, even though

Dudley (as cited by) Osaghae (2011) is inclined to believe that NCNC-AG coalition would have been more national, given their spread. Other considerations, particularly the need not to estrange the Northern Region, whose leaders could opt not to accept independence "if they did not control the federal government, or were not at the very least, part of it", became paramount, and produced a coalition government of "strange bedfellows and even serious rivals". Indeed, the last British Governor-General of colonial Nigeria, Sir James Robertson had foreclosed the possibility of an AG-NCNC coalition government when he invited Sir Abubakar to lead the new government as prime minister before all the seats in the election were declared, thereby pre-empting the outcome of the process and acting "without due constitutional propriety". By his action, he "ensured that no other ruling coalition could emerge without creating a political crisis".

It has been observed that the NCNC had rejected the AG's offer to form the coalition government with it because of narrow calculations of more excellent prospects of payoffs from NCNC-NPC government. However, the predictions failed to materialize in the form the NCNC had envisaged. The NCNC, therefore, sought to extend its power base in the Western Region, where it constituted the official opposition party. Hence, the crisis over the 1963 census and the desperations over the 1964 general elections and the political involvement of the military in settling disputes, which culminated into the eventual military seizure of power in January 1966, in the aftermath of the 1965 West Regional Parliamentary elections, thus bringing to an end "what many had come to see as an insufferable government".

Nigerian politics would conform to the patterns and directions set by the events and activities of the politicians of the First Republic, namely narrow calculations to oil the patron-client relationship which would satisfy elite demands and assure them of the support of their supporters. The result was that the elite competition for resource allocation and accumulation diverted Nigeria from the part of development, and sustained a vicious cycle of crisis, which culminated in a civil war 1967-1970, and years of military rule. Not even the splitting of Nigeria into smaller political divisions from its three- regional structure to 36 states could exorcize the ghost of ethnicity, local thinking, and parochialism from the polity. Instead, the emphasis on the sharing of federal resources and revenues, as well as distribution of offices to reflect national character did not include the proletariat whose interest the political class vowed to protect.

Despite Nigeria's vast oil resources and revenues, they did not improve citizens' quality of life. Oil accounts for over 80% of federal taxes and 90% of foreign exchange earnings. Nigeria's oil wealth peaked in the early 1970s, rising rapidly from a few hundred million naira in 1970 to 15 billion naira by 1980. However, Nigeria did not control oil production or processing, relying on foreign multinational companies for rent. The oil wealth, instead of improving living conditions, fueled corruption and power struggles, with political control becoming a tool for client patronage. This was evident in disputes over revenue allocation between the federal government and various state levels, as well as conflicts between oil-producing and non-oil-producing regions. The distribution of oil revenue became central to the crisis of Nigerian federalism, as Obi (1998) notes, with different state strata battling for the "spoils" of oil wealth.

The fortunes of Nigeria took a nosedive in the early 1980s due to a glut in the international oil market vis-à-vis increased demand for domestic consumption of oil in Nigeria which translated into increased volumes of petroleum products provided to satisfy the requirement. To meet the challenge, the government affected an upward adjustment in the prices of petroleum products, even as the government equally resorted to massive imports of petroleum products to augment dwindling local production. Consequently, oil wealth, rather than promote sustained economic growth, had ushered Nigerians into a period of poverty and misery. The military government of Nigeria had squandered the vast earnings from oil, rather than invest in manufacturing and up-lifting of the standard of living of the ordinary Nigerian. It has been noted that enormous oil wealth is a means of sustaining autocratic regimes in power, and does more significant damage to democracy by facilitating corruption, and turning out to be a curse for the vast majority of the citizenry.

In 1982, the attendant situation in Nigeria was characterized by the World Bank as "Poverty amid Plenty" (cited by Tella 2012: 59). The democratic regime that took office from the military, which had at any rate handed over a disorderly society, characterized by the breakdown of discipline, and widespread corruption that was promoted to "a way of life", unleashed even greater profligacy and corruption on the polity. As the elite class, they failed to pay workers' salaries, retrenched a large number of the workers, and called on the poor to make sacrifices if the economy would not collapse. Even as workers were retrenched the size of government was bloated. For instance, the National Party of Nigeria-led federal government in 1983 appointed at least forty federal

ministers, and sponsored legislators and top government officials on recurring overseas trips, which attracted huge allowances. This mismanagement of the economy meant a drastic decline in Nigeria's Foreign Reserves from N5.462 billion in 1980 to N798.5 million, hardly enough to finance one month's imports in 1983.

Conversely, Nigeria's external debt doubled from the US \$9 billion in 1980 to about US \$18 billion in 1983. In fact, despite vast earnings of N56 billion at the end of 1983, the federal government left a total of N17.7 billion in external debt. Thus, oil glut was only a partial explanation for Nigeria's economic crisis of the 1980s. This set the stage for the adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) in Nigeria

3. The impact of SAP on the Political Economy of Nigeria

Babangida's Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) aimed to revitalize economic growth by reducing state intervention, but it had devastating consequences for Nigeria's economy, agriculture, and industry. The government implemented worker retrenchments, dismantled public enterprises, and merged government corporations. Despite attempts to support rural areas through policies like the Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure, these initiatives failed due to corruption and underfunding.

While SAP didn't solely cause Nigeria's economic issues, it intensified pre-existing crises. It contributed to political violence, particularly along ethnic lines, with the rural population, especially in the North, suffering most. The removal of subsidies on imports and petroleum products severely impacted rural areas, increasing vulnerability for peasant farmers. SAP also exacerbated agrarian capitalism, land grabbing, and the collapse of the agricultural sector, further deepening the economic crisis. The government attempted to diversify by encouraging non-oil exports, but the introduction of the 1978 Land Use Act led to the dispossession of peasants. SAP's political and economic restructuring focused on state contraction and market-based reforms but failed to address the needs of the poor, increasing inequality and poverty. Corruption within the Babangida administration contrasted with the hardships faced by Nigerians, leading to widespread protests against SAP. The program worsened food insecurity, underemployment, and living standards, exposing the failure of SAP's policies.

4. The Impact of Structural Adjustment Policies in Nigeria

The structural adjustment had been created to rationalize a bloated African economy, where government expenditures had gone haywire, yet the World Bank, unfortunately, made the situation worse off. The World Bank statistics of adjustment lending in Africa are a record of colossal failure. Before the implementation of Structural Adjustment Policies in Nigeria, the economy of Northern Nigeria was agrarian in nature. Agriculture was the mainstay of the economy of Northern Nigeria. More than 80% of the rural labor workforce engaged in peasant farming, which accounted for a right proportion of the Nigerian GDP. The northern part of Nigeria was blessed with a geographical specialization of cotton, rice, beans, groundnuts, and livestock. However, the eradication of subsidy derived from petroleum products drove Nigerians further into abject poverty because the government were somewhat involved in debt servicing instead of providing the needed social services for the people, the effect of which was the creation of unemployment and under unemployment. Peasant farmers the bulk of who were located in Northern Nigeria were damaged, due to economic hardship. Even though one of the objectives of SAP was economic transformation, SAP instead led to the loss of jobs and government withdrawal of basic welfare packages. Subsidy withdrawal further caused a decline of businesses due to the devaluation of currency made visible in the difficulty of business transaction due to a new exchange rate. The implementation of structural adjustment policies in Northern Nigeria, leads one, in fact, to agree that SAP was fraught with stories of mismanagement of government resources, and did not go in line with northern interest. The government acted as if it was less interested in the welfare of its citizens, even though it was acting in accord with its beliefs.

One of the reasons ascribed to the dismal failure of SAP in Northern Nigeria is linked to the fact that SAP was not attuned to the dynamics and unique characteristics of African economies, grouped into two sectors, the modern industry operated by the elite class and the traditional industry operated by the poor. The bulk of agrarian workers, unemployed citizens, women whose culture and religion prevented them from working, children who could not afford education due to privatization policies and those dependent on federal government subsidy allocations from the North fell under the category of those in the traditional sector. SAP operated for the benefit of the modern industry to the detriment of the conventional industry. Thus, SAP facilitated a multiple duping by crooked African governments of the rural poor, through the misappropriation of some of its loans which the World Bank was fully aware.

5. The legacy of colonialism and independence

Britain's gradual amalgamation of Nigeria in 1893 aimed to pool economic resources across its administrative units. The formal merger of the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria with the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria on January 1, 1914, created Nigeria, but without the consent of its diverse peoples. The amalgamation, driven by economic considerations, was an imposition, as Nigeria remained administratively divided until 1939. Nigeria's pre-colonial states, such as the Hausa-speaking kingdoms and the Borno and Kanem empires, were reorganized under British colonial rule, merging distinct, interconnected peoples with centuries of trade and cultural exchange. These groups, though diverse, had historically coexisted and interacted, shaped by the Niger and Benue Rivers.

Nigeria gained independence in 1960, but the colonial legacy left a divided state. Ethnic identities, artificially emphasized by colonial rulers, became a source of conflict post-independence. British policies fostered division, and the creation of regionally-based political parties exacerbated ethnic tensions. Nigeria's post-independence governance, especially after military rule ended in 1999, struggled with ethnicism, religion, and exclusion, which hindered nation-building. Colonial rule focused on exploiting Nigeria's resources, particularly through the export of cash crops, undermining food production and local development. This economic exploitation, coupled with the exclusion of the masses from governance, contributed to Nigeria's ongoing challenges.

Thus, to assist the British rulers, the British led administration established a Western-oriented educational system in Nigeria. However, the beneficiaries were located in the South due to the strong presence of Islamic rule in the North. This development led to an educational gap between the North and South. At the dawn of Nigerian's independence, due to the demand by the educated elite for freedom from the British rule, it gradually led to ethnicism with a retreat into ethnic group politics, which encouraged an uneven development, educational gap and the struggle for dominance. The new constitution of Nigeria at independence was a reflection of these feelings; thus, for Bolanle Awe (1999), colonialism sowed the seed of conflict on many fronts. Politically, colonial rule alienated the ruled from the rulers; it also excluded different segments of people from one another. Even the educational policies adopted created a bridge between the North and South, with a positive consequence for

leadership struggle in the government and economy of the Nigerian state. Also, the disparity in developmental terms between the urban and rural areas led to alienation and conflict between the more productive and poorer classes, and urban and rural dwellers.

Thus, at independence, the newly elected leaders of Nigeria while paying lip service to equality and embracing all segments of the society saw the new state as an instrument of their will. Even the constitution at independence excluded women in the North from political participation, especially in matters about their lives. They were denied franchise alongside lunatics and children. Thus, Nigeria at independence adopted a development plan with the expression of high hopes for the development of a just and fair equal society, but the opposite was witnessed. Indeed, these new leaders at independence failed to involve the masses of people whose lives were being planned. Due to an emphasis by the political leaders at and after independence on growth and development based on Gross National Product per capita calculations and capital accumulation at the detriment of sustainable development, it was not a surprise when the majority of Nigerians at independence turned to other avenues such as their communities and ethnic groupings to seek fulfillment.

The economic development policies carried out by the political leaders at independence went towards a downward slope at the discovery of petroleum. Rather than improving the standard of living for Nigerians, it made it worse. One important point to highlight is the fact that even though the discovery of oil led to the establishment of many development projects; road constructions; industries which created employment for skilled and unskilled labor, it also created rural-urban migration, thus leading to the decline of agricultural production in the Nigerian economy. Nigeria became a net importer of food items such as sugar, rice, beans which were otherwise obtainable locally at prices cheaper than purchasing. Thus, the oil boom of the 1970s served as an instigator in the conflict and divergence between the elite and the proletariat.

It is in line with this that the military seized power intending to correct the wrongs of civilian rule. Thus the first republic crumbled due to a lack of vision, opportunism and the acceptance of the logic of the colonial political system by the elite and the proletariat. Other factors such as the cleavage along with regionalism, religion and ethnocultural lines provided the opportunity for the triumph of ethnic chauvinism and parochialism, irredentism and

geopolitical sentiment. The military was however not without fault, and it also played a contributory role in the heightening of conflict and divergence within the Nigerian society because of the exclusion of the vast majority of Nigerians from modern governmental processes. The government, after independence until the military coup still operated within the colonial frame because it was a government of the minority. In accepting the conditionality's of SAP the Bretton woods system did not acknowledge governance, loans were disbursed to both the military and civilian rule even though most African government at that time were excluded from modern governmental process.

Going further, Uche et al (2024) asserts that colonial legacies have contributed to cyclical poverty and instability by strengthening corruption, exacerbating regional inequities, and impeding national integration which has shaped the trajectory of Nigeria from the 20th century till date.

6. Conclusion

Colonialism played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary identities and conflicts in Nigerian society. Upon independence, Nigeria inherited an economy structured to send raw materials to Britain, with finished goods returned for consumption. The colonial economy was designed to depend on Britain for Nigeria's growth and development. Adewara (2020) outlines three primary goals of the British colonial economy in Nigeria: expanding commerce through the export of raw materials, creating a cash economy based on British currency, and forcing Nigerians to work for this economy.

Colonial infrastructure, like roads, railways, and ports, was built to serve British interests, not Nigeria's development. By independence, Nigerian leaders still reported to the British, with ethnic groups representing the major power bases. The British fusion of diverse groups into an artificial political entity catalyzed ethnic competition and conflict over scarce resources, eventually contributing to the Nigerian Civil War. Ethnicity also played a central role in conflicts in other African nations, such as Zaire (Congo).

Colonialism's legacy continues to shape political stability, economic growth, and the provision of public goods in post-independence Nigeria. While the colonial powers justified their actions as bringing civilization, the destruction of pre-existing institutions led to deep societal and organizational conflicts, which scholars now view as harmful rather than beneficial.

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