

Youth Empowerment Andnational Development In Nigeria

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ABSTRACT :*The level ofnational development in any given country is largely dependent on the extent to which the enormous potentials of its youth are harnessed and utilized by the government to promote and sustain economic growth and social progress. In Nigeria, widespread unemployment has constrained the efforts of the youth to contribute meaningfully to national development. Using descriptive analysis drawn majorly from secondary data,the paper established that widespread unemployment and poverty in Nigeria has not only induced youth disempowerment, but also created conditions that predisposes the youth to deviant behaviours which hinder economic growth, political stability, harmonious social cohesion, and overall national development. It is recommended that if Nigeria is to join the league of the 20 strongest economies in the world by the year 2020, the potentials of the Nigerian youth as the locomotive of national development must be properly harnessed and utilized by eliminating the obstacles that hinder people from transforming their physical, biological and socio-economic environment for their individual fulfillment and for the benefit of society at large.*

KEY WORDS: *Youth, Development, Unemployment, Poverty.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Youth in any society are known as the leaders of tomorrow. They play a crucial role in the prospect for development and should be included in all national development plans and programmes. The power of the youth to drive global development was recognized in 1965 by member states of the United Nations (UN) when they endorsed the declaration on the promotion among youth of the ideals of peace, mutual respect and understanding between peoples (United Nations, 2007).The United Nations General Assembly in 1985 called for the international youth participation development and peace, to harp on the critical role of young people in the world. Interestingly, the assembly endorsed the guidelines for further planning and suitable follow-up in the domain of youth, which are significant for their focus on young people as broad category comprising various sub-groups, as opposed to a single demographic entity (Udeh 2008).Equally, in 1995, the UN also strengthened its commitment to the youth by directing the international community’s response to the challenges of young people into the next millennium. It promoted this by adopting an international strategy namely the “world programme of action for youth for the year 2000 and beyond”. The essence of the initiative is to address more effectively the problems of the youth and to increase opportunities for their participation in society (United

Nations, 2007). The programme provides policy framework and guidelines for national action and international support to improve the condition of youth in the world. In addition, it builds on other international instruments such as the Rio Declaration on environment and development, adopted in 1993 at the world conference on population and development; the Copenhagen declaration and the programme of action of the 1995 world summits for social development and the plat form for action adopted by the 1995 world conference on women. These laudable commitments have been made to meet the challengesof youth development in the world.However, thirteen years after the world programmes of action for the youth was initiated, youth of the developing countries, especially in Africa are faced with heavy maladies including unemployment, underemployment, illiteracy, hunger, poverty, drug abuse, moral decadence and violence. In Nigeria, youth are disinherited and refused everything. The schools have rejected them for want of space and they have not found work (Udeh 2008:3). They are also confronted with problems of fanaticism and cultism among others. Millions of youth in Nigeria face bleak employment opportunities and are vulnerable shocks in labour markets(National Youth Policy 2006). Youth described in this manner cannot make any meaningful contribution to national development.

The foregoing suggests that in order to achieve stability and national development in Nigeria, the youth must be properly equipped and empowered to sustain all aspects of programmes and initiatives that targets youth development. In other words, conscious efforts must be made to address the various constraints to youth productivity in Nigeria. The objective of this paper therefore, is to highlight the constraint to youth productivity in Nigeria and examine their consequences on stability and economic development. The paper makes use of descriptive analysis and draws its data from secondary sources. It is divided into four sections. Section consists of introduction. Section two provides a conceptual clarification of the core variables and locates them within an operational context. Section three identifies the constraints to youth productivity and examines their implication on national development in Nigeria. Section four recommends strategies for youth empowerment and national development in Nigeria.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Youth: The concept of youth has attracted various interpretations that have mounted to a state of controversy. This controversy arises because of the difficulty in reaching an agreement on the age bracket that should constitute the acceptable youth age. Many countries see youth as ending at the age when a person is given equal treatment under the law – often referred to as the “voting age”. In many countries this happens when the young person is 18 years old. After this age, the young person is considered adult. In spite of the disparity in these views, it is generally agreed that youth is the period that marks the physical, psychological and social transformation into adulthood. Based on this characterization, many government policies consider to include people aged 13 to 25 years old (Wyn and White 1997). The pan-African Youth Chatter (2006) defines youth or young people as “every human being between the ages of 15 and 30 years”. This corresponds with the English convention which classifies the period of youth as falling within the ages of 15 to 30 years (Wokocha, 2002). The peculiarity of the Nigeria situation has led to the invention of social and economic definitions, which treat youth as a thing of the mind and so admits people up to the age of 40 years and beyond. Economically, the lateness of the period of independence for the average young Nigeria leaves them socializing in the realm of youth for as long as they remain dependent on their parents or guardians and this could be well beyond the age of 30.

It is important however, to maintain that despite the debate, the most vital point is that, the youth are indispensable facet of any given society. The task of developing them to enhance societal growth rests squarely on the shoulder of the state that beholds them. **Empowerment:** This is commonly used to refer to a widely participatory process of directed social change in a society, intended to bring about social and material advancement including greater equality, freedom, and other valued qualities-for the majority of the people through their gaining greater control over their environment (Arvind and Everett, 1989). **National development:** This refers to the unending process of qualitative and quantitative transformation in the capacity of a national entity to organize the process of production and distribution of the material benefits of a society in a manner that sustains improvement in the well-being of its members in order to enhance their capacity to realize their full potentials, in furtherance of the positive transformation and sustenance of their society and humanity at large. It involves the efficient utilization of the national productive resources to attain productive efficiency; the efficient utilization of resources to raise productivity as a means of attaining allocative efficiency; the provision of sufficient food and fibre of adequate quantity to attain consumptive efficiency; the enhancement of income-employment opportunities to attain goals of equity and distributive efficiency; and the dynamic spatio-temporal equalization of income-employment opportunities to evolve maximum welfaristic efficiency (Esan, 1996; Onuoha, 2008).

III. CONSTRAINTS TO YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

The contribution and participation of Nigerian Youth in issues that affect their lives and national development is hindered by a number of factors which include the following: **Lack of qualitative education:** The provision of qualitative education to the teeming population of youth has remained a problem in Nigeria. The inability government in meeting the growing educational needs of the population became, overwhelming during the later part of 1970s and into 1980s, around the time the present generation of youth were set to begin their basic education (Kura 2008). Although many policies have been introduced to provide free and compulsory schooling, education has remained expensive for the average household because of non-tuition costs such as uniforms, books, and transportation. As a result many of the currents youth cohorts have been unable to complete a basic primary education, which is considered the minimum level required to function in the society (World Youth Report 2007). In addition to formal education, non-formal education is also important for the development of a young person’s capabilities as an individual and as a responsible member of society. Here in Nigeria we have high rate of dropout amongst our young people from different institutions of learning on pecuniary grounds.

Most of these drop-outs often end up in urban centers in search of menial jobs. Others end up on the streets, high way junctions, and traffic lights hawking different items as “mobile super markets”. Worst still those who succeed in going through their schooling have very slim prospects of a job not to mention of well-paid jobs. Many of our teeming graduates given the nature of our decaying educational system can best be described as “Para-literate” or “half baked graduates”, and as such unfit to compete with their counterparts around the world (Kura 2008). In situations, therefore, where our youth are ill-equipped or not equipped at all to participate in the socio-economic life of the nation, the scenarios usually present themselves. It is either the individual or group of them is not involved in the development process, or he or she participates negatively. In either case the society or community loses out as the individual succeeds only in dragging the society backwards. In our own case, since the youth are not prepared to properly partake in the development process, they often contribute negatively; they are more or less involved in those retrogressive activities which retard the society such as kidnapping, oil bunkering, cultism, armed robbery and political thuggery.

Limited role in data collection, information and research on issues affecting youth: Young people should be involved as active partners not only when information products are designed and when information is collected, but also in defining the theme of the information collection, translating material based on the research. Participation of the target group in information collection guarantees that the product answers their expectations and needs. However, such involvement is largely missing from participatory approaches in Nigeria. Today, youth have limited access to information, and where it is available it is often neither youth friendly nor current. Young people are usually forced to make use of information products that have been conceived and developed by adults who employ sophisticated adults vocabulary and methods of working. An example of this scenario is the 2008 National Youth Policy review where a consultant was contracted by Federal Ministry for Youth Development to review the former policy made in 2001 and only for the youth to be described as ceremonial presentation of the reviewed policy in all the six (6) geo-political zones of the country. Young people’s involvement in research is usually limited to data collection, rather than analysis, write up, or education based on the findings. This is at variance with the argument that participatory research should incorporate different stakeholders involved in and affected by a problem, who should take responsibility for carrying out research and working towards a solution. To this end, the process of finding the solution and solution itself cannot be repeated, and is most appropriately carried out by those affected by the problem (Kemmis and Wilkson, 1998).

IV. UNEMPLOYMENT AND UNDEREMPLOYMENT:

High rate of unemployment and underemployment among the youth in Nigeria has hindered their participation in the economic and social sectors of nation building. Nigeria has about 146 millions. About 70 to 80 per cent of this population is made up of youth and more than 80 percent are unemployed (Ibrahim, 2008). The estimated 10 percent in employment are burdened and depressed with near total dependence of relatives and family members (Giwa 2008). An unemployed individual usually lives a life of penury and deprivation since he/she has no means of sustaining him or herself, and consequently cannot satisfy his/her basic needs. Such an individual is vulnerable and can easily be manipulated by others in a position to meet his or her needs or even a mere promise of a better and fulfilling life. This is often the case with drug pushers and armed robbers most of whom are youth. Without any fear of contradiction, one can say that unemployment and poverty are two most important impediments not only to the participation of the Nigerian youth in national development, but also to the progress and development of the country. For Nigeria therefore, to achieve stability and national development, these twine ills plugging the country must be tackled and at their roots too.

Poverty: Many of today’s youth in sub-Saharan Africa have suffered the consequence of severe poverty from birth. In Nigeria, hunger and poverty are currently ravaging the country thereby exposing our inability to feed ourselves. Indeed, one can assert without hesitation that majority of Nigerians are poor (Uchechukwu, 2008). In spite of all the efforts by successive governments to reduce poverty, including the introduction of such programmes as Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) and the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) by Obasanjo administration in 1999, in which huge sums of money was sunk, the poverty situation has worsened as the population of the poor has continued to soar (Uchechukwu, 2008). The central factor sustaining unemployment and poverty in Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. That is, the unwillingness and inability of both the political and bureaucratic leaders to rise to the occasion in their responsibility and the challenge of personal example which is the hallmark of true leadership. Basically, there are two ways in which the problem of bad leadership which has been sustaining poverty and unemployment in Nigeria can be highlighted here. One is the manner in which Nigeria leaders have been mismanaging the huge and God given resources of the country. Nigerian leaders waste the resources of the country in the purchase of foreign goods and services for themselves, friends and cronies instead of providing for the needs and solving the problems of the citizens as well as the general development of the country. Secondly, a large chunk of money

meant for the development of the country has been stolen through inflated contracts, fraud and other dubious and corrupt methods. Most Nigerian leaders who loot state treasuries have taken the money to foreign banks mostly in Europe and America (Agbagbu 2008). A large part of the state resources which should have been used in the establishment of industries to employ the youth and provide the needs of the masses is lost in this manner. HIV/AIDS: There is a strong relationship between HIV/AIDS, national development and poverty. Increasing evidence demonstrates that poverty contributes significantly to the spread of HIV and AIDS. This occur in many ways including through lack of educational opportunities, lack of health services, lack of viable employment opportunities, and a poverty-driven sense of hopelessness and fatalism (Cohen, 2005). HIV and AIDS pandemic pose another major challenge for young people today. This pandemic is changing youth's perception of themselves and expectations about their future. Many feel hopeless and fatalistic, seeing the HIV and AIDS pandemic as beyond their power to change. Pessimism about the opportunities youth have for employment or livelihoods and contribute to national development, may lead them to live for what they see as an uncertain future. Resources allocated to combat AIDS may also reduce investment in education and primary health care, with consequences for future economic growth. By shortening life span, AIDS also lowers return on public investment in both health and education. Stigma and discrimination deter young people from making meaningful contribution to national development.

Girl child discrimination: Girls and young women face systematic discrimination within entrenched power relations that perpetuate an almost universal subordination of female. Gender norms and bias ingrained in educational and economic policies and structures limit the social, economic and political contributions of girls and young women. They are left vulnerable to physical, sexual and psychological harm by the men in their families and communities seriously curtailing their violation to involve in socio-economic endeavours.

7. Globalization and the digital divide: Young people in Nigeria both suffer and benefit from the process of globalization. On the on hand, they are flexible enough to use the new opportunities it offers. On the other hand, many lack the skills they need to benefit from these new opportunities. Not only information and communication technology (ICT) empower young people and improve their lives, but it can also deepen existing inequalities by excluding youth from the information revolution. The digital divide, characterized by unequal access to ICT, is a major problem for many young people in Nigeria today. Implications of Youth disempowerment on National Development in Nigeria No nation can develop in atmosphere of violence and despair. To his end, unemployment and poverty as common manifestations of youth disempowerment are the greatest threats to peace, security and national development in Nigeria.

The restiveness and violent conflict in the Niger delta with its dire consequences for national security are traceable, in part to the level of poverty, unemployment and underemployment in that area (Orluwene 2008). As a result of unemployment and poverty in the region, youth have been involved in violent agitations which include hostage taking and bombing of strategic oil installations to draw attention to the plight of the region. Currently, the area is producing young and talented criminals whose actions are threatening not only the corporate existence of the country but also undermine the economy (Udeh 2008). The crisis in the region has also provided a platform criminal elements intent on vandalization of crude oil pipelines and illegal bunkering to make money. In addition, there is a heightened incidence of arms smuggling into the region in particular and the country in general. The influx of these guns has worsened insecurity in the region as well as aided the growth of organized criminals syndicate specializing in the theft and illegal export of crude oil. The implication of this for stability and national development are far reaching.

Furthermore, the growth of ethnic militia, vigilantes and criminal gangs in Nigeria, since the advent of democratic rule in 1999 has been linked to youth unemployment and poverty. This has implications for public order, peace and security in Nigeria (Nwanko and Udeh, 2005). Youth have been involved in the many ethno-communal conflicts that erupted in recent years in Nigeria. Unemployed youth have been scripted in ethnic and religious armies and militias such as the Odua people congress (OPEC), the Egbesu boys, the Arewa people's congress, the Boko Haram militia and most recently, the Ombatse militia group. The activities of these gangs and groups pose serious threat to national security.

Youth unemployment and poverty in Nigeria has serious implications for national security and political stability. The Youths as political thugs have been used to foment electoral violence and as assassins to eliminate political opponents with attendant repercussions for national security and democracy. They are used to wrought all sort of electoral fraud and malpractices such as ballot snatching and stuffing. Youth unemployment and poverty also undermine national economy.

As youth engage in activities that are inimical to security such as drug trafficking, hostage taking and vandalization of oil pipelines, they undermine the economy of the country. It is a fact that Nigeria's output in crude oil at the moment has been reduced to more than half of what the country used to produce due to militant attacks, piracy and vandalization of oil pipelines (Gua, 2008). It is clear from this analysis that youth deviant behaviours in Nigeria which are largely caused by joblessness constitute a threat to the security, stability and economic development of this country. It is therefore, necessary to ensure that the Nigerian youth undertake and sustain the process of national development by nurturing, mobilizing and offering them opportunities to participate effectively and constructively in the development process. Strategies for achieving youth productivity and economic development in Nigeria

The following measures can be adopted to enhance youth productivity and achieve stability and development in Nigeria:

Employment Generation: Given the high rate of unemployment among the youth in Nigeria, it is obvious that serious efforts must be made to generate more employment opportunities for them. In this regard, there is need to have a data bank of all unemployed youth, each isolated by skill and educational level. The data collected in all the 774 local councils could be used by all employment generating agencies to fix applicant appropriately in jobs where they have competence. In addition, to create more jobs in Nigeria for the youth, government needs to provide the enabling environment for the private sector to thrive. This could be through the provision of socio-economic infrastructure such as electricity, telephone, roads, and housing, particularly in the rural areas. One of the ways to generate employment for the youth is through agriculture. Government can achieve this by making available modern farm tools and establishment of agricultural hubs in the six geo-political zones that could employ thousands of the youth. These agricultural hubs could be serviced and supported by cottage industries. For example, the setting up of an oil milling factory in a hub where soybeans and ground nuts grow will stimulate the production of groundnuts and soybeans; and also impact on non-farm employment.

Moral re-orientation: The youth in Nigeria need moral rejuvenation. The moral decadence in the society where the ethos of fairness, impeccable character, hard work and other standards of good behaviour have been jettisoned for greed, god fatherism and loose morals is deplorable. The country must do everything possible to help the youth in this regard. Moral reorientation of the youth is needed to reduce the mentality of get-rich quick by any means possible, which lures many of them into crime and other deviant behaviours. The ostentatious life style of the elite who display ill-gotten wealth is eroding the philosophy of hard-work and patience in the youth of today. There is therefore, the need for faith-based organizations, non-governmental organizations/civil society organizations, as well as traditional institutions to engage the youth in moral reorientation that preaches against corruption, get-rich quick and occultism.

Increased Vocational Training: Increased vocational training is needed to empower the youth and extricate them out of unemployment and poverty. Deliberate effort must be made by all stakeholders to promote youth vocational training and skills acquisition in all facet of workmanship. To this end, more technical schools need to be established and technological villages established in all states to absorb the youth that will graduate from these technical schools. The national directorate of employment (NDE) must be empowered to increase its capacity in providing vocational skills to unemployed youth.

Rural Development: Another aspect of making the youth in Nigeria to be productive is by developing the rural areas. Youth unemployment in the rural areas is high and therefore, calls for concerted effort at accelerating rural development. It is important to improve socio-economic infrastructure in the rural areas as a means of empowering the youth in these areas to engage in meaningful endeavours. Rural development will also lead to increased trade, higher income and social development. It will also generate more employment opportunities, which will enhance national security. To achieve rural development, government at all levels needs to engage the private sector to leverage on their resource and competence to transform those areas through the provision of infrastructure on terms such as build, operate and transfer.

Improved Access to Micro Credit: There is the need to ensure adequate access of youth to micro-credit in Nigeria. The involvement of youth clubs or community-based organization which the young people belong, that will be guarantors for applicants can help in this regard. The micro-finance banks may be mandated to set aside certain percentage of their loan facilities for the youth. Greater access to micro-credit by the youth will reduce unemployment and poverty among the youth and also assist in reducing rural-urban migration.

Sporting Facilities: Provision of adequate sporting and recreational facilities both in rural and urban areas for the youth can help them to express their talents. It will also assist the youth to discover themselves in the field of sports such as football and boxing among others.

These facilities will engage these youth and remove them from mischief and cultism. Many of them could find lucrative careers in sports. Review of Youth Policy: The national youth development policy was formulated in 2001 as an official declaration of the importance of youth in national development and reviewed in 2008. It will not be out of place to suggest that another review of the policy be made given the emerging trends in the Nigerian economy since 2008. Such a review would require the active participation of youth from all over the country, and should take into cognizance contemporary issues affecting youth empowerment in Nigeria such as HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, youth restiveness, unemployment and so on. In addition, there are agencies that are supposed to be set up for the youth, which have not been done. A review of the National Youth Policy will address these lapses.

V. CONCLUSION

The contribution of youth to national development in Nigeria is grossly encumbered by several problems especially unemployment and poverty. Yet our leaders carry on as if everything is fine. A situation where Nigeria relies on foreign assistance and food import to feed her citizens and create employment opportunities for the youth is preposterous. The inability of the political class to play politics according to rules and regulation which leads to the over-politicization of national issues and problems is another bane in the wheel of stability and economic development in the country. The high level of corruption, especially at high places must be tackled, while accountability in government must be institutionalized. But all these must be anchored on a new political economy different from the current peripheral capitalist system which is controlled by instrumental finance capital. Nigerian leaders must realize that Nigerian problems must be tackled by Nigerians and through Nigerian approach. International financial institutions such as the international Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and other Bretton woods institutions should not be relied upon to solve our problems, especially those of poverty and unemployment.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper suggests the following as measures for overcoming the hurdles of unemployment in Nigeria:

Review of Educational System: The Nigerian educational system needs a review and reform to link schooling with the job market. This is because many Nigerians, particularly the youth are largely unemployed due to lack of requisite skills needed in the competitive global employment market. The basic questions that must be asked in seeking to address the unemployment challenge are: What does work mean in Nigerian context? What kind of workers does the economy require? What is the connection between the school system and the job market in the context of vocational manpower development? What constitute work in Nigeria? At the moment Nigerian leaders seem to be more interested in form rather than substance. In the mean time, the country's education system continues to produce millions of graduates for whom there is no market demand. This must be seriously addressed.

Provision of Socio-economic Infrastructure: Availability of socio-economic infrastructure like electricity, telephone, access roads and housing especially in the rural areas can stimulate economic activities that would enhance the productivity of the youth and increase their contribution to national development. There is need to remove such major constraints as credit avenues, technology back-up training support, marketing assistance, entrepreneurship development, etc. **Establishment of Industries:** The government should develop cottage industries which should be linked to agricultural processing community. Government can achieve this by aggregating farmers into groups, site semi-processing industries in the rural areas which will serve as markets to the rural farmers. This will prevent the cyclical pattern of agriculture products. Government can also make available modern farm tools and establish agricultural hubs in the six geo-political zones that could employ thousands of the youth. These agricultural hubs could be serviced and supported by cottage industries.

Improved Access to Micro Credit: There is the need to ensure adequate access of youth to micro-credit in Nigeria. The involvement of youth clubs or community-based organizations which the young people belong, that will be guarantors for applicants can help in this regard.

The micro-finance banks may be mandated to set aside certain percentage of their loan facilities for the youth. Greater access to micro-credit by the youth will reduce unemployment and poverty among the youth and also assist in reducing rural urban migration.

Good Governance: To put Nigerians to work, the solution so much lies in a reinvention of the nature and purpose of government by the political and bureaucratic leadership. Once upon a time in this country, Nigerians were a busy people; jobs were available, unemployment was low. In Ibadan, Lagos, Onitsha, Kaduna, Enugu, Port Harcourt, there were industrial complexes where factories produced goods for both local consumption and export; and an army of workers – skilled and non-skilled queued up to work and earn a living. All these strides

have been lost largely due to leadership failure. That is the willingness and inability of the leaders to rise to the occasion in their responsibility and challenge of personal example which is the hallmark of true leadership. To make a difference, Nigerian governments must take practical steps. What is required is not rhetoric, not bureaucracy. Resources of the country should be used in developing the country and not be stolen through inflated contracts, fraud and other dubious and corrupt methods.

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