

RE-EVALUATION OF THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN YOUTH IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The prevailing political, economic and social cultural situations in Nigeria currently have made the re-evaluation of the role of the Nigerian youths in national development imperative. Recent happenings particularly the 2023 general elections and the high level of youth unemployment have raised many pertinent questions especially the place of the youth and their take with regard to the future development of this country. The Nigerian political space is dominated by old and almost senile politicians who do not care about the future of the country and her citizens. The same applies to the economic sphere where few old people are holding sway, resulting in the youths resorting to all kinds of economic vices like cybercrime, 419 and money rituals. Even in the sphere of sports, the politicians determine who represents the nation in various games. Merit is jettisoned and sacrificed on the altar of mediocrity, nepotism, religion, ethnicity and godfatherism. The resultant effects are the stagnation and backwardness of the nation. The aim of this paper is to re-evaluate the role of the Nigerian youth in national development taking into cognizance the role the youths have played before in championing the cause of national development. The paper employs the philosophical methods of analysis and evaluation to conclude that only a radical philosophy of liberation can salvage the Nigerian youths from this malaise and empower them to play their rightful role in national development.

Keywords: Nigeria, Youth(s), Development, National Development and Philosophy of Liberation

Introduction:

The youth force is an invaluable asset of the nation. The youths are not only a vital force of the state but also a change agent. The youths are pioneers of economic, social, political and cultural transformation and change driving force. This class remains an important asset of the nation because of courage, innovativeness, inquisitiveness and high level of self-confidence, which are also considered to be the main sources of nation building. Population of the youth in Nigeria accounts for almost 37% of the total population, “given that the youth is the backbone of the nation from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, it is necessary to make overall development of the youth and include their capacity in the mainstream of national development” (National Youth policy

of Nepal, 2010). The Nigerian youths are unique in many ways and should be integrated into the mainstream of national development so as to enable them contribute their quota to the development of the Nigerian nation. Regrettably, this is not the situation. The Nigerian nation is abundantly blessed with both human and material resources. With a population of about 200 million and abundant natural resources, the country ought to be among the high-ranking nations in the development index. Regrettably, this is not the case. Nigerian ranks very low in the development index with about 60% of her population living below the United Nations benchmark of one US dollar a day. What this translate into is that majority of the populations are living below poverty level. This is an irony considering the resources available. No wonder the former U.S. President, Bill Clinton on a visit to Nigerian during the Olusegun Obasanjo's regime made a comment "Nigeria is richly blessed but poverty stricken". The former American Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton once described Nigeria as a failed state. Yet, Nigeria is the giant of Africa and once "she sneezes, other African countries catch cold", what an irony.

The situation in Nigeria especially the situation of the Nigerian youth is not only pathetic both lamentable; youths without future. These hopeless youths are embodiments of different talents, creativity and ingenuity. These God-given potential talents are left untapped to the detriment of both the youths and the Nigerian nation because untapped talents, creativity and ingenuity are wasted assets. These untapped talents are the bedrock of development in any society.

The indispensability of development to the survival of any society is not contestable. Even in nature, all living things obey the natural law of development. Once a living organism disobeys this law, it ceases to exist. This is also applicable to any society. Let us pray that the Nigerian nation will not cease to exist. The youths are not only the leaders of tomorrow but also the future of any nation. A nation without the youth is a nation without future.

The importance of the youth in developing their habitats and environment, in bringing changes to their production systems, of introducing new technology, in questioning existing power structures and changing age-old inhibitory social beliefs and attitudes has been articulated several times over. The youths are the key to sustaining long-term social, economic and political development, and are an integral part of the society. Thus, the youths play an important role in shaping a successful future for societies the world over (Divyakriti, 2015).

The Nigerian youths have the capacity to do all these and even more. However, their participation and involvement in national development have been hampered due to neglect by successive government. This is the thesis of this paper.

Conceptual Clarification

The Youth: This class consists of young people between the ages of 15 to 42. Some classify them as between 16 to 40 years. This group constitutes the most productive force of the population and in most countries constitutes one-third (1/3) of the population.

They are the foundation of the economy and the most latent and active force for change and transformation of any society (Edelman, G.U. *et al*: 2004). All these are made possible through youth leadership.

Youth leadership can be defined in two ways; the ability to guide and direct others on a course of action, influence the opinion and behaviour of other people and show the way by going in advance (Wehmeyer, Agraan, and Hughes, 1988) and “the ability to analyse one's own strengths and weaknesses, set personal and vocational goals, and have the self-esteem to carry them out. It includes the ability to identify community resources and use them, not only to live independently, but also to establish support networks to participate in community life and to effect positive social change” (Adolescent Employment Readiness Centre, Children's Hospital n.d). This is the type of youth leadership the Students Union Government should provide and inculcate into the students to enable them face life in a realistic way both in the university and the larger world.

Development - The term development is very eclectic. Different scholars define it in different ways. While some see development as material, others see it as encompassing both the material and the spiritual. However, this paper is not going into the debate of what constitute development.

Ugwuja (2008) defines development as a gradual movement along a definite trend from one stage to another involving several stages producing cumulative effects towards the achievement of a desired goal or objective of the people. The phases of changes are initiated by the people within the community or society. It is a qualitative improvement in the living standard of a people as exemplified by the level of industrialization, food production, size and distribution of labour force, pattern of income distribution, health facilities and access to its use, security, access to education, good housing and availability of basic amenities.

For Rodney (1969), development is a multifaceted process. At the level of the individual, it implies increased skills and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-reliance, responsibility and material wellbeing. Development for Nyerere (1978) is man's capacity to expand his consciousness and therefore his power over himself, environment and his society. Man for him is the central pivot around which development revolves. Todaro (1989) defines development as a re-organisation and re-orientation of the entire economic and social systems. This involves, in addition, improvement of income and output, radical changes in institutional, social and administrative structures as well as in popular attitude, customs and beliefs.

Development can be conceived as a process and a situation whereby the basic needs of the people are taken care of in terms of their social needs and services. This kind of view shows that the concept of development is rooted in the concept of the overall political, social, economic, cultural and technical aspects (Ugwuja, 2008).

As adequate and exhaustive these definitions are, there are inadequacies. Development should begin with the human person and from there, proceed to the environment. In this vein, development will be defined as a striving by the human person for his/her overall positive development and his/her environment. It encompasses all the efforts we make to improve ourselves and our environment and by extension our society/nation. These efforts include economic, socio-political, cultural, spiritual and moral aspects of our being.

National Development is also used to refer to a constructive process of engaging all citizens and building social cohesion, economic prosperity and political stability in a nation in an inclusive and democratic way (Jega, 2012).

National development therefore means all these efforts by the citizens of a nation to make life better and healthier. Following from the Nigerian perspective, it entails all the efforts the Nigerian youths have made to make this country better.

The opposite of development is underdevelopment. This situation is characterised by stagnancy, deterioration, decay, insecurity and abject living standard of the people. This is the situation in many countries of the world especially in Africa and Asia.

The Role of the Youth in National Development

The youths are the vital force of any nation. Without the youths, there would be no nation. No development is possible without the contributions and efforts of the youths.

The Nigerian youths have played major and indispensable roles in all facets of our national development. In the area of security, the youths constitute the greater bulk of our security personnel. The security agents have and are still involved in the task of ensuring the security of lives and property. Nigeria would have ceased to exist if not for the efforts of these young men and women in protecting the nation from both internal insurgency and external aggression. Many of them paid the supreme price in the course of these assignments. The Boko Haram insurgency is one of these aggressions.

The bedrock of the national economy is the labour force provided by the youths. The youths are the driving force behind the economy of any nation. They form the bulk of the working populations. They are responsible for creating the wealth of any nation, they possess a lot of talents, creativity and ingenuity which are sources of creating national wealth. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, the greater population of the youth are unemployed with an estimated unemployment rate at about 60%, most of these youths are denied the opportunity to contribute their own quota to national development.

In the area of sports, the youth are the engine house of sports development. The Nigerian youths have contributed immensely to the development of sports at both local and international levels. Some of our celebrated sportsmen and women are ambassadors of global organisations like UNICEF. The Kanu Heart Foundation has saved many lives. These sportsmen and women have contributed immensely to national development.

The entertainment industry in Nigeria is one of the best in Africa. The Nollywood industry is a major contributor to national development. The same goes for the music industry and other entertainment and shows. This sector alone, (entertainment) has provided many youths with decent jobs and consequently enhancing their contributions to national development.

The youths are agents of political and social change in many countries of the world, the youths determine and direct the course of political and social life of the nation. This is made possible because of their population. The history of Nigeria is replete with this legacy. The youths' demonstration in 1963 led to the abolition of the office of the governor-general and restored full republican status to the nation. The anti SAP riots and the I.B.B.-must-go demonstration changed political course/trajectory of Nigeria and forced Babangida to step aside in 1993. The Nigerian youths were also major key players in the 2015 general election that witnessed the defeat of the ruling party and an incumbent president by the opposition All Progressive Congress led by Muhammadu Buhari, the End SARS protests etc. Major political and social revolutions all over the world are executed by the youths. The youths are not only agents of change but also reformist as well.

More instances can be given in enumerating the contributions of the youths to national development *ad infinitum*. This is because there is hardly any spectrum of our national life that the youths have not impacted. From security to wealth creation, political and social, sports and health, rural and urban development, shaping national opinion to change and reform, education and religion, the youths have contributed to development.

However, in recent times, there is a serious decline to these contributions. What are responsible for this decline? Why are the Nigerian youths of today not as active as the youths of yesterday? Why this high level of complacency? What is the role of the youths and the government in the emergence of this anomaly and what does this situation portend for the future of the Nigerian nation?

Youth Programmes in Nigeria

Since independence in 1960, successive governments in Nigeria have initiated different programmes aimed at creating a forum for the youths to contribute to national development. The Gowon administration established the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme in 1973. The aim was to create a platform for the Nigerian youths to serve the nation in states outside their zone. This is to enable the youths from diverse cultural and language background to interact with a view of enhancing national unity. This scheme is still ongoing but the philosophy behind the scheme is being greatly challenged. Intending corps members now work their posting to states of their choice. Secondly, many corps members see the national service as a routine and a period of rest after the hectic days in the higher institution. A greater number are interested in the monthly allowance. Regrettably, there are no concerted efforts on the part of the government to address this ugly trend.

Beside the National Youth Service Corps scheme, the Babangida administration established the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) and the Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) to cater for youths' unemployment. The open apprenticeship scheme of the NDE was created to enable youths acquire skills that will help them establish themselves and contribute to national development. There are also National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the Subsidy Reinvestment Programme (SURE-P). These are laudable programmes to ensure youth participation in national development. Unfortunately, all these programmes have not achieved the goal for which they were established. The reason is not far-fetched. Successive governments in Nigeria are good policymakers but poor policy implementors. These programmes were marred by endemic corruption and lack of commitment on the part of both the youths and the government.

Most youths who participated in these programmes were enlisted by influential politicians and traditional rulers as fringe benefits for them to collect monthly stipends. They do not have the need and the commitment. In some cases, the money meant for the programme finds its way into the purses of wives of traditional rulers and party stakeholders.

The youths are also responsible for their inability to contribute positively to national development. There is a negative value system prevalent among the youths. These value systems are consumerism, squandermanism, good life without hard work, corruption and quick riches. Many Nigerian youths operate with these negative values. For this group, "life is nothing but enough money to buy good food and drinks, a good and well-furnished house, a good and one-in-town car, a good network of human connections to enable one to get anything one wants (Eboh, 2005). The need for good ladies to play and move around with could be added to the above list. How and where this money comes is immaterial but it must come. The consequences are Internet fraud, 419, corruption and pen stealing or what many call white collar robbery.

In Nigeria today, "the average Nigerian strongly believes that money is almighty and can achieve anything and everything. It is the key to paradise on earth, to prosperity, power, social importance, even national honours etc. (Okolo, 1993). This is why the pursuit for money is a do or die affair. This attitude is responsible for the high rate of crime and even ritual murders. It has also made the youth more consumer oriented than production oriented. We are currently under the firm grip of money consciousness, consumer oriented and squandermania mentality (Asogwa, 2008). Nobody is interested in what he/she can contribute to national growth rather what bothers most is how to milk the nation dry. The contentious issue is how to share the national cake without caring how the national cake is baked. This has resulted in an unprecedented high level of corruption which ultimately distorts national development. This corruption and impunity are seen by many as the factors responsible for poor performance of the past Jonathan's administration and a major contributor to the defeat of the administration in the 28th March, 2015's presidential election and the present Buhari administration.

This situation is not only hopeless but pathetic. It makes our youth a generation without future. The present is gloomy, the future uncertain. This psychological quagmire has resulted in drug abuse and other social vices among the youths. The big question becomes; is there any way out?

The Way Forward

The problem of national development in Nigeria is anchored on a negative philosophy which inevitably gives birth to poor and wrong value system and orientation. For any nation to grow, the youths must have a positive philosophy which guides their lives. The Nigerian youths are victims of negative philosophy and poor value system. The only way forward is a value re-orientation of the Nigerian youths. This value re-orientation must emphasize the dignity of labour, integrity and all positive and honourable ways of living. It will be a philosophy that will de-emphasize the current negative value where people want to be rich without working, a philosophy of indolence. This philosophy will enable the youths raise critical questions concerning their role in the scheme of national development. It is this critical attitude that will enable the youths interrogate their current role and make a U-turn for the better. Philosophy as a rational, critical, reflective, systematic and coherent inquiry is possessed by all human beings because any normal being will always examine and re-examine his/her world and his/her experiences. This is the foundation and a sine-qua-non for human and national development. According to Bertrand Russell (1978)

The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason.

This is the core of the problem of the Nigerian youths, no tincture of philosophy. With a tincture of philosophy, they will be “furnished with a strong foundation for critical thought” (Agudosy, 2009). This may partly be the reason why the National Universities Commission (NUC) made the study of philosophy compulsory in the university curriculum. This will go a long way in enhancing critical thinking and inculcating the right values into our youths.

Towards a Radical Philosophy of Liberation

According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, philosophy of liberation is the distinct manifestation of Latin American philosophy that has received the most international attention and that has had the most influence but within Latin America and the United States.

It has a practical aim: liberation. In very general terms, the philosophy of liberation defines itself as a counter philosophical discourse, whether it be a critique of colonialism, globalization, racism and socialism which is articulated from out of the experiences of exploitation, destitution, alienation and reification in the name of projects of liberation, autonomy and authenticity.

Positively, the philosophy of liberation attends cultural diversity, gender and racial equality and political sovereignty. As a critique of all forms of philosophical dependency and inauthenticity, it is consciously and avowedly a meta-philosophy.

This is the only philosophy that can wake the Nigerian youths from their “dogmatic slumber”, from ineptitudeness, procrastination and instill in them the imperative of political, economic and socio-cultural participation and liberation. This philosophy has given birth to what is today celebrated as “youth power”. The youth power is not only global but impactful in global development. Youth power is a campaign organised globally for making the world much more developed. The youths of the society try to make changes at the local, national and international levels with their creativity and proper way of thinking. They mostly encourage other people in the society to participate in the movement towards the development of the country. According to Ezekwesili (2013), as globalization and modern technology continue to shrink our world, people are connecting worldwide as never before, particularly young people who are overcoming cultural, geographical, language and ethnic barriers with ease. For the first time in human history, we are seeing the emergence of a global youth culture with common values, dreams and desires.

Youths of other nations have questioned and overturned the *status quo* and established new norms in the governance of their nations. The Nigerian youths are no exception. When it becomes an imperative for their generation to save Nigeria from its cycles of disastrous and destructive choices promoted by the older generations, then, they can rightly be called the turning point generation (Ezekwesili, 2013). The turning point is when there begins to emerge a new Nigeria that is radically different from all that we have known of failures politically, economically and socio-culturally. The turning point is the point of restoration of dignity to Nigeria. That quality or state of being worthy of esteem or respect; of being regarded as nobility and having worth. This type of youths with this liberation philosophy cannot permit the show of shame by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and our political and spiritual leaders. This brand of youths will operate on dignity that is conferred on a life of effort and hard work and not on a life of ignoble ease for the latter can easily become dulled by contemptible wealth as is very prevalent in our Nigerian society today.

The Nigerian youths of today are plagued with an attitude of fatalism which is resignation and acceptance of any situation. These are not the youths that will contribute positively to national development. The youths should borrow a leaf from the indefatigable Nigerian youths of yesterday who fought for and initiated moves for positive changes. The End SARS protest is still a reference point where youths rose up and said no to injustice. Nigerian youths can only make their impact felt if there is a driving ideology in the form of a philosophy of social action. Only a radical philosophy in the form of a philosophy of liberation can provide them with the tool to change the *status quo* and contribute positively towards national development in our contemporary world.

Concluding Reflection

Obviously, any nation's existence is premised on the existence of the youths. No youths, no nation. The Nigerian youths have made remarkable contributions to national development but lately, this role has come under scrutiny and doubt. The decline in this role is attributable to a poor value system. This anomaly can be corrected by a value re-orientation which will inculcate the right values into our youths. This philosophy will equip them adequately to play their pivotal roles in national development. What the Nigerian youths need now is critical and discerning minds that will enable them distinguish the good from the bad, the noble from the ignoble, and reality from the shadow. Only a sound mind occasioned by philosophical vision can enable them achieve this. Azenabor (2010) argues that philosophers with “their concerns for values, goals, ends of human society, human activity and the means of achieving these, the philosophers are better qualified to play the role of helping to determine societal values, development and progress”. We are all philosophers by virtue of our rationality. What is required of us is the application of that rationality to the problems of national development. This will “make us citizens of the universe, not only on one walled city at war with all the rest. In this citizenship of the universe consist man's true freedom and his liberation from the thralldom of narrow hopes and fears” (Russell, 1978).

The problem with the Nigeria youths is the relegation of philosophy to the background. Philosophy brings about authentic human relationship which is needed for national development. According to W. T. Stace, “whether we like it or not, we cannot escape philosophy: because on whatever road of knowledge we travel, philosophy lies in wait for us”.

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