

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN NIGERIA: PROMISES, PROBLEMS, AND POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract

In recent years, youth development has drawn substantial attention in research and spheres of governance. Although many problems such as youth unemployment, violence, corruption, and ethnoreligious crises, cyber fraud among others have combined to forge a problematic for youth development, to the point that the image of the Nigerian youth is battered, this paper challenges this notion of the negative view of youths in Nigeria. The paper attributes the various challenges of youth development in Nigeria to the paradox of the state and argues that the key problems lie in a wider national difficulty of development. By using descriptive methods, the paper argues that governance structure conditions youth development in several ways. The paper recommends that alternative approaches to youth development should be framed into policy to ensure that the potentials of youths are attained in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria, Youth, Development Policy, Youth Empowerment

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Introduction

Youths are the foundation of society. Their energy, inventiveness, character, and orientation define the pace of development and the security of a nation.

...Chief Olusegun Obasanjo.

(National Youth Development Policy, 2001)

While there are different connotations of the concept of “Youth”, little is left in doubt to the resourcefulness and strategic relevance it has to a nation’s development. Young people can be pivotal to national development if they are furnished with the right knowledge and are exposed to the right opportunities. Defined by the socio-economic and political realities in Nigeria, young males and females between the ages of 15 – 29 years are considered as being ‘Youth’ (National Youth Policy, 2019). On a global scale, there was 1.2 billion youth aged 15 - 24 years globally in 2015, accounting for one out of every six people worldwide (UN, 2015). Currently, Nigeria ranks seventh on the world index of most populated countries, with a population estimated at over 200.3 million people in 2019 (UNFPA, 2020). Out of this number, 40.3 million people representing 19.8% of the entire population are youth. This figure alone is larger than the population of 199 countries of the world (UN, 2019) making youth development a serious national concern.

The era before independence saw nationalist movements invigorated by the energy, mind-power, and ingenuity of young men and women who took an active part in the struggle for the emancipation of their fatherland. The National Youth Movement (NYM) founded in 1934, was representative of such youth organizations (Taylor, 1995). Following the establishment of the National Youth Council (NYC) in 1964, and National Youth Service Corps in 1973, successive governments have attempted some forms of policy inclusion for the transformative development of young people within the country. While this may look like meaningful efforts invested towards the development of young

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people, there seems to be a big divide between the objectives of these varying policies and the realities on the ground. Therefore, this paper takes a cursory look at the major Youth Development Policies in Nigeria since independence. It outlines some of its core objectives, stating some common problems in the policy executions, and proposes a sustainable plan of action.

Conceptual Clarifications

Youth: As with most concepts, there are different perspectives on the understanding of the word 'Youth' (Njoku & Osigwe, 2019). Nevertheless, the definition of youth on an age range basis provides the commonest approach to the concept (Jimoh & Ali, 2016). According to the USAID Policy on Youth (2012), Youth is a life stage, one that is not finite or linear. Owing to this fact, key multilateral organizations define youth as 15-24 years for statistical purposes, while many countries and organizations expand this range to either reflects changes and developmental needs of young people or their transition to adulthood based on diversity among cultural contexts (USAID, 2012). Henze (2015) provided a sociological clarification of the word as a period of life in-between childhood and adulthood. She described it as a time of experimenting with roles and identities which prepare youngsters for their lives as full members of the social collective. During this process of social integration, young people find themselves in a complex social system, made up of such elements as tradition, history, social demands, hopes, and individual prospects, all of which they have to incorporate into a coherent picture to build a proper foundation for their personal life (Henze, 2015).

Within the legal framework in Nigeria, individuals from the ages of 18 to about 35 years are regarded as youth or young adults, especially as they are deemed old enough to make some important life decisions on their own (NYP, 2001). However, the only reference to 'youth' in the 1999 constitution was in Part III, section 5a, which was a direct reference to the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) (FGN, 1999).

Development: To understand development policy in its broad context, a definition of the term ‘development’ is necessary. There is little doubt that the word ‘development’ enjoys wide usage in our daily lives. Whether we are referring to a form of personal improvement or making reference to socio-economic progress, development has to do with a form of advancement from a less-desirable state to a better one. According to Switzerland’s Department of Foreign Affairs, development is a common worldwide endeavour to secure the foundations for the long term social and economic progress of humankind (FDFA, 2011). Similarly, The Red Cross and Red Crescent subjectively defines development as the process by which communities, families, and individuals grow stronger, can enjoy fuller and more productive lives, and become less vulnerable (IFRC, 1995). Premised on the foregoing, it can be observed that development is often closely linked with growth. In the words of Todaro and Smith (2009) development is a process of harnessing all available human and material resources of society for national growth in a way that ensures equality, liberty, and freedom.

Policy: Policy can be viewed as an integrated course and program of action, together with the framework or guideline that a government has designed to direct action and practices in a certain area (Ikelegbe, 2005). The underpinning idea is that policy represents a set of principles and agreement which is the function of the result of a decision made as to how best to achieve a specific objective (Torjman, 2005). In a nutshell, a policy is simply a statement of intent, implemented as a procedure or protocol.

Development policy has its modern root in the 1940s through to the 1960s, during the increased agitation for decolonization and rapid economic growth. The focus of most nations at the time was poverty reduction through the increase of GDP per capita (more loosely income per capita) (Addison, 2004). Consequently, development policy became largely an issue of increased quality of lives and standard of living of citizens. The result of this was a rapid surge in industrialization and urbanization that saw a mass drift of labour from sectors with low productivity

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rate (Agriculture for example) to sectors with higher turnovers (e.g industries). Crudely put, industrialization and urbanization became synonymous with development in the minds of many policymakers from the 1940s to the 1960s (Addison, 2004).

Governance and Challenges of Youth Development Policies in Nigeria

As mentioned earlier, the development policy for many governments became deeply rooted in the notion of poverty reduction and the increased standard of living for citizens. This was the atmosphere that absorbed the newly independent nations in the 1950s and 1960s. Uche (2019) observed that, over the years, successive governments in Nigeria had adopted different types and models of development plans to drive her quest for sustainable development and self-actualization. However, no single administration can dispute the fact that it had fallen short in the creation and implementation of a comprehensive and functional youth development policy (Uche, 2019).

The first National Development Plan was flagged off in 1962. Two years later, the National Youth Council (NYC) was formed. The political upheavals in the mid-1960s made progress impossible to track. However, prominent in-school groups like the Girls Guide, Boy Scouts, and Man O'war took root within the time. Out of school efforts in the 1960s and 1970s included facilitation of the emergency and development of voluntary self-help associations which promoted community development, skills and vocational training programmes, competitive activities, and cultural festivals (National Youth Policy, 2001). By 1967, Nigeria went into a secessionist crisis leading to a civil war that lasted for three years. For integration, tolerance, and unity, the Gowon administration established the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1973. This program mandated young graduates to offer a one-year compulsory service to states and communities other than their own.

To battle rising youth unemployment and promote skill acquisition in the face of economic challenges, a new national policy on education was promulgated in 1977 that gave room for

vocational courses in the educational curriculum (Emeh & Eke, 2006). Following this development, the Chukwuma Committee was set up by the Federal Government on 26 March 1986 (Omoruyi and Osunde, 2004). The report from the committee led to the establishment of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) in November 1986. The new directorate was charged with the responsibility of promoting skills acquisition; facilitating the spirit of creativity, self-reliance, and independence (Emeh & Eke, 2006). While there were several youth-centered activities like national sports and cultural festivals in the 1970s, the very first National Youth Policy was formulated in 1983 leading to the establishment of the Ministry of Youths and Sports (National Youth Policy, 2001). The 1980s was a decade that saw increased global calls for more youth-focused policies in member states of some international organizations (Isah & Vambe, 2013). For example, The United Nations General Assembly in 1985, called for international youth participation, development, and peace, to emphasize the critical role of young people in the world (Udeh, 2008). This commitment was strengthened further when the year 1985 was declared the “International Youth Year”.

The end of that decade saw a rapid advancement in social-economic programmes such as the Social Development policy promulgated in 1989. This coincided with the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) and the three-year Rolling Economic Plan aimed at resuscitating an ailing economy that was head-deep in debt. This trend impacted significantly on the proportion of the country’s human capital such that by the end of the 1980s, the World Bank and the IMF ordered their borrowers to downsize their public sector and civil services (ILO, 2005). This harmed young men and women who had to fight unemployment through the informal sectors.

Sadly, the 1990s witnessed total neglect of youth-centered policies and development programmes. A dire consequence of this was the abolition of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, as youth development became widely perceived as sporting and recreational activities. By 1999 the new democratic administration under

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President Olusegun Obasanjo facilitated a new draft of the National Youth Policy and Strategic Plan of Action in 2001. This led to the re-establishment of the Federal Ministry of Youth in 2007. Some of the key objectives of the National Youth Policy of 2001 were to:

- Ensure that all youths are given equal opportunities and guided to reach their full potentials.
- Inculcate in the youths, leadership, and followership values and make them socially responsible and accountable.
- Involve youths in decision making at all levels of government in all matters affecting them.
- Provide opportunities for youths, whether in or out of school, for vocational training geared towards self-employment and self-reliance.

Also, the Obasanjo administration introduced the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) which was saddled with the responsibility for coordinating and monitoring all poverty eradication schemes in Nigeria. In 2006, agitations blew hot in the Niger Delta region. Some Youth in the region had formed an armed group dubbed 'The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta' (MEND) to protest the continuous indiscriminate exploration of oil in the region, which was harming communities and the ecosystem (Hallmark, 2013). After losing billions of dollars in oil revenue to the armed group's activities against oil facilities and companies within the region, the Federal Government brokered an amnesty deal with the restive youths in 2009 (Hallmark, 2013). To ensure the ceasefire agreement was sustained, the federal government invested millions of US dollars in development training and scholarships to the youth. The projected duration of training ranged from 3 - 18 months and after which the ex-militants could choose between wage employment and self-employment (Kalio, 2013). The Amnesty deal has been largely acclaimed to be successful but somewhat thickened the belief system that violence gets the Nigerian Government to flex the knee easily (Nwankpa, 2014).

In 2009, a second National Youth Policy was drawn up. As expected, there was no big divide between the 2001 and 2009 youth policies. However, the latter was better structured and well-phrased amongst other things. Some of its stated objectives were to:

- Establish a general policy framework which will provide guidelines on all matters relating to youth development;
- Approach youth problems from a holistic (comprehensive) perspective to ensure the coverage of the most critical elements;
- Promote youth participation in the democratic process, as well as in community and civic decision-making process;
- Ensure that all youth programmes are youth-driven and youth-centered;
- Reduce youth unemployment through the promotion of self-employment enterprises;
- Increase youth involvement in decision-making, leadership, community-based and other development programmes;
- Mobilize resources for youth programmes and projects at all levels;

President Goodluck Jonathan's administration set up the Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWin) in 2011. YouWin was a contest that rewards the most promising business ideas with funding targeted at promoting the spirit of entrepreneurship and business development amongst Nigerian youths. In 2015, when President Muhammadu Buhari led administration came to power, it introduced N-Power, which has his administrative commitment to empower and create job opportunities for the teeming population of youth in Nigeria. It currently estimates over 500,000 beneficiaries as its beneficiary on its official websites as of August 2020.

The National Youth Development Policy of 2019 was themed "Enhancing Youth Development and Participation in the context of Sustainable Development". Subtitled under its policy benchmarks and strategic thrust, the 2019 youth development policy has been

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more daring than any of the National Youth Development Policies before it. Its five years projections come up as nothing short of wild optimism as it seeks to create an average of 3.7 million jobs per year (approximately 18.5 million jobs over the 5-year policy period), with priority on youth employment (NYDP, 2019). On Agriculture, it pledges to enhance youth access to the multi-billion Naira CBN MSME fund. This will be done by reviewing its design and implementing enabling initiatives to encourage on-lending in addition to enhancing agricultural extension services to 1:1,000 by 2020 and to 1:750 by 2022, and with priority on youth in agriculture (NYDP, 2019). Also, it will attempt to create the Nigerian Youth Development Fund (NYDF) with a special focus on lending credits and grants to youth entrepreneurs and agropreneurs (NYDP, 2019).

Alternative Approaches and Recommendations

No one is born a citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Youth must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself away from its youth severs its lifelong; it is condemned to bleed to death. - Kofi Annan former UN Secretary-General (United Nations, 2004: p.271).

The Arab spring in 2011 is a testament that youth are an increasingly potent force, capable of instigating major social, economic, and political changes in the world. A government that neglects its youth does that at its peril (Abdulwaheed, 2017). Admittedly, various administrations since 1960 had at least lent a voice to the need to promote a form of youth-driven policy. However, a careful examination of these various policies with exception to the more recent ones would reveal that the policies were not carefully planned and prepared. If anything, most of these youth policies were more reactionary than they were proactive, usually the last-minute attempts to proffer a temporary solution to a persisting problem. Therefore, to attain a strategic mobilization and

effective integration of the Nigerian youth for national development, the following strategies are advocated:

1. Consistency in planning initiatives and implementation:

According to a recent study published by the K4D Helpdesk Report (Price, 2019), the working-age population in Nigeria is set to increase rapidly in absolute terms: by some 66 million people between 2010 and 2030 (World Bank, 2016).

Some 40 to 50 million (or more) additional jobs will be needed to employ Nigeria's population between 2010 and 2030. These numbers translate into over 2 million additional jobs per year (World Bank, 2016).

Generally, in Nigeria, women experience higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than men; youth have higher unemployment rates than adults; and underemployment is higher in rural than in urban areas (although unemployment is higher in cities) (Making Cents International, 2016). These brewing challenges cannot be the sole responsibility of a single government or administrative tenure. What was largely obtainable in the past and is still a common practice today, is that, a successive government attempt to overhaul the policies and programmes of their predecessors, especially when the transition is between two different parties. While this may be justified within the context of politics, bitterness, rather than logic is often the motivation behind such actions. To facilitate effective execution of youth policies in the nation, leaders must learn to approach key youth development policies as a collective responsibility for the good of the entire nation. The NYSC is a testament to what is possible when sustainability becomes a key ingredient of youth development policies in Nigeria.

2. Creating an Enabling Environment for Entrepreneurial activities to Thrive:

According to the National Youth Policy (2019), entrepreneurship among youth is a vital approach to reducing youth unemployment which has

additional potential to bring self-fulfillment to youth and contribute towards improving the national economy. The 2017 World Bank report on the Ease of Doing Business ranked Nigeria as one of the most difficult countries to do business with a rating of 169 out of 190 economies (World Bank, 2017). In another report published in October 2019, Nigeria was ranked 131 out of 190 showing a considerable improvement. The difficult requirements in the opening, registering, and operating a business in Nigeria continue to pose a major challenge for young people who aspire to be entrepreneurs. Besides, the inadequate power supply, poor road networks, and constant exploitation of revenue and tax-force agents cripple the smooth operation of many startup businesses. Mader (2018) highlights that young people in Africa do not “generally lack the skills or education to work, nor are idle by choice” but “the provision of opportunities to work is the main challenge”. There is a need for new and more effective demand-oriented policies that generate livelihood opportunities to sustainably address youth un/underemployment in Africa, rather than focusing on supply-side interventions and further skilling up the workforce.

Young people should not just be pressured to delve into entrepreneurship, government must also solidify policies that protect, support, and encourage these various businesses to thrive. One of the ways to do this is by allowing easy access to startup loans and capital while ensuring a conducive and tax-friendly atmosphere for small and medium enterprises.

3. Pursuing youth employment policies in high-impact areas.

The ever teeming population in Nigeria suggests that food security is an important area of concern. Inarguably, Agriculture will remain the largest employer of labour for a long time and, unless growth in the nonagricultural sector becomes highly labor-intensive, employment in agriculture

is expected to increase in absolute terms (World Bank, 2016,). Treichel (2010) observes that in Nigeria “the employment potential of the agriculture sector is limited relative to other value chains, given that future growth in this sector will rely largely on productivity improvements” limiting its potential for large-scale job creation (Treichel, 2010). Price (2019) shared the conviction that, In Nigeria, the contributions of manufacturing industries, information and communications technology (ICT), and entertainment services to recent economic growth show the significant potential for entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic dynamism (World Bank, 2016, p. 41). This was also corroborated by the view of Treichel (2010) who suggests the growth strategy for Nigeria should focus on the services and manufacturing sectors, highlighting light manufacturing, construction, ICT, wholesale/retail, meat and poultry, oil palm, and cocoa as sectors with the highest employment potential (Treichel, 2010). Shishima (2019) believes that imparting technological consciousness in the Nigerian youth is a means of achieving sustainable development. Nigeria cannot talk about sustainable development without a sound acquisition and nurturing of science and technology. Therefore, the Ministry of Youth and Sports Development should steer the government to focus her attention on pursuing youth employment policies along these lines.

4. **Active Youth participation in Decision Making:** Youth policies in the nation will continue to fall short of expected standards if the input of young people in governance is continually neglected. It is in the light of this reality that the late UN secretary, Koffi Annan maintained that “Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be agents of development and peace. If, however, they are left on society’s margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the

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lives of the societies” (UNDP, 2012). Young people’s interests are frequently overlooked in the public policy sphere in favor of those of more powerful interest groups. It is not necessarily the case that the welfare of youth is deliberately disregarded, but because their voices are not heard and the impact of public policy on their lives is discussed in decision-making forums, their concerns never reach the top of the political agenda (Kabir, 2008). In 2016, several civil society groups including YIAGA Africa led by Samson Itodo advocated for the adoption of a bill titled “Not too Young to Run”. The bill was sponsored in the House of Representatives by Tony Nwulu and in the Senate House by Abdulaziz Nyako. The bill pursued an alteration in section 65, 106, 131, 177 of the constitution of Nigeria. It seeks to reduce the age of running for elective positions for House of Assembly and House of Representatives from 30 years old to 25 years old and office of the president from 40 years old to 30 and independent candidature in Nigeria (YIAGA, 2018). President Muhammadu Buhari led administration assented to the bill in May 2018. This crucial rule change played an important role in signaling the need for greater openness to youth participation. Young people should be allowed to take an active part in decision making and implementation of policies within the country. On the other hand, the youth must learn to become tolerable and desist from being used as political thugs and violent agitators during electioneering periods. The Ministry of Youth and Sports Development must strive to remain politically neutral while pursuing more youth participation in the running of the affairs of the nation.

Conclusion

One of the most troubling trends in Nigeria is the lack of political will to always follow through in the implementation of written policies and decisions. The presence of a substantive population of young people in Nigeria who are energetic and committed to bettering their lives should reinforce the belief that the youth are an

indispensable asset to national development. Therefore, there is the need to create a more robust, inclusive policy and plan of action for the youth, as they have a right to take a larger part in the responsibility of shaping the future they will inherit.

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